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Note

[image]

WARNING: This is NOT a history book. Please don't take anything to be too historically accurate, but I try to make is as accurate as comfortable for storytelling. Some facts just won't fit with the story plot, and the plot is what make the story.

If you do not like the Russia x Germany ship for any reason, I have to warn you, this is one.

This is for enjoyment purposes only and please don't take any comments or characters seriously, it's fiction. I am remaining neutral with any country, organisation, religion, belief or policy/ politics within my story. ENJOY!

(Photo is not my own, belongs to Dreamstime)

The picture on top of each chapter signifies the Point of View. (The two pictures of the flags are off Wikipedia)

Prologue

[image]

The time was right. He could say something. He could finally say sorry, maybe beg for their broken friendship, maybe scream in anger and sorrow, maybe cry in despair, asking for one last chance. Broken. He broke it. The other man looked at him. Even though he was looking at the fallen man, his eyes were blurred by tears of both anger and sadness. He was tired, injured and hungry. He had no soul anymore _It was all gone, wasted from the constant warring and anger.
"Es tut mir leid....you understood me."

"You betrayed me,"

"I'm sorry."

"I trusted you,"

"I'm sorry."

"You hurt me,"

"I'm sorry."

"I loved you."

"I'm sorry....my..."

"I will never forgive you."-The huge man looked down at the pitiful sight. The man he stood over was on the ground, beaten and fatally injured. The USSR sighed and pulled his heavy overcoat off and laid it on the German beneath him. Third Reich smiled. A small glimmer of hope passed in his mind, maybe Soviet would actually save him,

bring him back to health, and he could apologise...and they could finally fulfil their dreams. His blood soaked the Russians coat, and the pain multiplied, he too was not only freezing, but he hadn't slept or eaten in days. The campaign was the most important thing to him. Until it failed- and now he was at the mercy of the Soviet Union, whose mercy was beginning to ebb.

"Danke....danke schön...I haven't slept in days."

He looked up, giving USSR the most grateful look he could imagine. But his smile faltered, as he saw the sight above him. He tried to scream, or run or anything. But his every move was painful, and his throat dry. Those half-dead eyes looked at him, no mercy, warmth or love penetrated the dark green gaze, like an angry forest prepared to eat any brave hiker who dared venture in.

"I hope your dreams are sweet, then."

"Nein...Soviet...no need...please...."

Pain seared through his neck and head, as if his brain stopped cooperating, even though the man above did not move a muscle. Soviet did nothing, and no expression ever came on his face. He lifted his eyes to see his battle torn, weary, ever large territory. He had to see it suffer. He would change that. In the wind, the pines bowed in defeat, finally being able to do so after standing proudly on the borders for so long.

It was cold, a cold day for the month of May (That Rhymes) but to the Russian, it made no difference. He was already cold on the inside, and only certain people could thaw him deep enough. One of them, the one under him, just froze him over anew. The Third Reich realised his mistake too late, and rectifying it was almost impossible. His falter in confidence created a hole for the USSR to strike, and he did so, full of hate and anger. Third Reich's mind fell into a loop, and his thoughts circled like birds: Apology, hate of himself, Soviet, Apology, loathing, Germany, Germany, Germany. He did not dwell long on his son. For all he knew, Germany was dead. No remorse for that now. He couldn't even save his own skin, much rather anyone else's.

"I'm so sorry....I can change Soviet...I promise..."

"I will never forgive you,"

"I....I really can....I really do....please...."

"I will never forgive you,"

"Please...I'll do anything...torture me if you must....please,"

"I will never forgive you."

"Let....Let your anger out on me....make me your eternal servant....humiliate me....just..."

"No. I will not do that. No one deserves that. You. Don't. Deserve. My. Mercy."

"I know....I know...I'm sorry...Soviet....I...."

"We've gone too far. You hurt me way too many times. I have a boundary that you crossed and then you cut it open. How, how am I to let anyone cross it again?" USSR was now seething in silent anger. It should have already been done. Why was he being weak? This conversation shouldn't have happened. He let it slide. The Third Reich promised him, he said empty words and promises full of spider webs, and letters of a love that didn't exist. He left his needy family to follow a dead end cause, promising him riches, joy and a life he never had. No. It was all a lie. USSR wasn't loved as a child, nor as in adult, he created his world with his own hands and brain, and built his empire from his own sweat, blood and tears. Long and hard years swept over him, giving him a hard and lean stature, broad shoulders and a resilience to cold and heat and wind alike. What it didn't give him resilience to was love. He still fell for the touch, the word and the kindness. He should have been prepared, that some small little man would offer him that. Joy. Since he never felt it before, he was greedy for it. He tasted the sweet nectar of love, and wanted more and more of it. He wanted Reich to give him, and became blind to the manipulation that happened under his very face. Reich stabbed him at the last second, and the flow of truth came gushing out forcefully, after being caged

for so long, and the harsh reality slapped USSR hard.

"I....I never knew...I am so sorry...."

"You aren't."

"Yes I am....I wanted to help you.....you just needed to let me in....."

"And destroy all my life's work? All of my life was spent on this land! Just to give it away?" His scream echoed a cross the plains. Nobody was around them. USSR made sure that his citizens were far from the monster and himself. So he could speak freely, without a mask of apathy.

"Из за тебя, Рейх, я превратился в лицемера. Но ничего, ничего, я все исправлю по честному." He spoke slowly, so the German understood his every word. Third Reich, unfortunately, did, and moaned apologetically, trying to elicit some mercy from the tall Russian over him. The wind picked up, and the brown earflaps of USSR's ushanka billowed in the gale. USSR trailed his dark green gaze over the German, over his land, and then sighed. He did so very often, even his own children noticed. How nice.

"I....I just wanted you to know....I never meant to hurt you.....just...."

"...."

"Just....I thought.....you needed my support.....and I would give it to you...." Third Reich knew he was stretching the truth too far. Yes, he wanted to help Soviet, but it never crossed his mind that the mighty Russian would need support. To Soviet, support, was a dirty word. It was a twisted word, that he never uttered, and never let anyone in his presence say it either. Third Reich was crossing the line.

"Es tut mir leid....Soviet, I.....you....you helped me...."

"Yes, I did. I will help you now too."

"I'm sorry....I'm so sorry....."

"You betrayed me."

"I...."

"You took what mattered most from me."

"....."

"I put my trust with you, I gave you more trust than I give to myself, to God."

"I...."

USSR continued without giving the German a chance to say a word. It was all gunpowder and gasoline layered under explosives inside of him, and Third Reich lit a match to start the fire.

"You hurt me where I thought nobody could. I let you into the titanium vault with no windows and doors, and you unsheathed your sword and scratched the walls with your symbol."

"Soviet....please stop...." Third Reich felt sick, as if he drank the whole ocean. Soviet was digging close to the truth, and he was getting uncomfortable. The tiny needles in his stomach became knife jabs, and even though the bleeding of the wounds became a trickle, it began to harden to the sides of Soviet's coat. His mouth became drier than it was before, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, all the saliva drying up as he panted from exhaustion.

"I loved you more than my own, and you tried to kill them."

"No...Soviet...."

"I loved you, Reich." he said through clenched teeth. "Past perfect tense. Loved."

"I'M SORRY!....ah...." His screams befell the land, and he was getting frustrated at Soviet as ever. What did Soviet want? He apologised already, but he was in no condition to go on to fix his actions at the moment. His eyes were threatening to close, from the lack of sleep and from the tiredness of fighting. The muddy and beaten earth

beneath him felt colder than ever and the rocks unearthed from the soil poked his skin through the relatively thin fabric of his uniform.

"Didn't you hear me the first time?" USSR sighed once more, this time with a sense of need, and looked at Third Reich for a long moment. Poor man, he thought. So much potential, but so much uncertainty. Their pasts looked the same, abusive, struggling, and dreadful. But their futures were different, and so we're their ideologies. Both on two radical ends of the spectrum, as they say opposites attract, they came together to try to neutralize the mixture of anger and mistrust. But the acid ate away at the metal, and the alkaline submerged the acid. There was no more time to dwell on the past, to fix the mistakes, or to mend all broken promises. The crime has a punishment.

"Soviet....I loved you too....please...I'm sorry...."

"I will never forgive you." With that phrase, quick as lightning striking the ground, USSR withdrew a compact pistol from his belt and shot the German through the chest. Death was instant. Third Reich didn't have time to even scream. As soon as he did so, the wind died down. The clouds let some rays of the sun penetrate the bloody landscape. USSR kicked the body once, huffed, then knelt down to face it. He smeared some of the blood onto the gun, and then put it into its holster. He took his brown ushanka off, and placed it on the ground. Closing his eyes, he tilted his chin up towards the sky. He inhaled deeply, and then let out a sorrowful cry that sounded like a sad melody, that started out low and deep and loud and then progressed to a higher pitch, decreasing the volume, finally ending at the highest note he could muster, ending softly and bringing his head down to his chest. The last notes of the war echoed in the distance. His mourning has ended. He took a stone, and placed it at the head of the dead German's body.

"You have taught me, nevertheless, a valuable lesson my dear, Reich. I shall, from this day forward, never trust the likes of anyone. Taking your life meant that you took my heart and soul with you, up to the afterlife, or wherever you are going. No life exists after death, and my heart and soul exist no more as well. May you sleep well my love, and your dreams be as clear as the August sky. I do not wish you any evil or harm as you wished upon me. It

is not nice to speak bad of the dead, nor of your departed loved ones."

The rays of the sun fell on to the pair, Alive and dead. The warmth of the sun did not cut farther than his skin, and do not give the pleasant feeling of happiness it did in his childhood. The eyes of Third Reich began to dim, and USSR could now clearly see that the German's eyes weren't pure black after all. They were a sort of deep brown with a slight orange, like logs set on fire at night, when they are reduced to embers. It was captivating, until the glassy mist swept over them, making it more of a smoky brown, until it existed no more. USSR gently closed the fallen's eyes, to make the impression of sleep, patted his head affectionately, smiled a bit, and then stood up, shook his own head. Putting his ushanka back on, without looking back at the body, he set off, to search for his army, his people, and his family, all waiting patiently for his arrival, to celebrate the victory over the monster of the west. But deep down inside, USSR would be mourning, and rethinking his actions, and hitting his own head for not saying things that should be said. But he couldn't dwell on it any longer. There were more important battles to fight, protocols to discuss, and treaties to be signed. The past should not be swelled on, or the hole of despair and remorse becomes deeper and deeper, until he wouldn't be able to dig himself out. He wouldn't look back, he wouldn't trust anyone, and he would calculate ever move carefully. But one peek back wouldn't hurt, would it?
"I will never forgive you, Reich....
....you broke me."

Life before it Started

[image]

Three words made me jump for joy today. Three. As I scrolled down my email inbox, I found an insignificant letter from my dream university. It seemed strange, since I already accepted my fate of going to my foster father's technical school to become a mathematical analyst. I had to admit, even to me that sounded dull. Since I was never good with my hands, I wanted a job dealing with numbers and calculations rather than running from the chalkboard to the workbench like my foster father, who insists I call him whatever I like. I would constantly fumble with numerous equations, not because they were particularly hard, or I didn't memorize them good enough, but knowing that I had to apply those equations to a piece of metal or use tools to transform that equation into a physical thing....I didn't know how to, or where to start. He seemed to be tired with me, and I would drain his energy faster than his job would, so I meekly said I'd rather do something theoretical, and he surrendered to my plea.

In truth, I wanted to be an economist, one who deals the market, and runs the economy of a land. I would never tell my foster father that, since he thought I applied for mathematics. He told me that it would be better if I had just gone to his old school, but he nevertheless let me try, again, because I had asked. The university was the top of the whole world. It had state of the art facilities, programmes, internships, and professors. Only the best were allowed to the International University of Unified Partnership. IUUP, as it was called, was revered by all, and if accepted, people said, your life was practically paved in gold. It used to be for aristocratic children from all over the world, but then let in other students of high capabilities and intelligence. One flaw, and your out of the game. IUUP was not a joke, and the exams and interviews were the harshest. You would apply for a specific major, and pass the exams needed for that major. I barely passed my own, but made it at the ninety sixth percentile, which earned me a small smile from my foster father, who rarely smiled in my direction at all. The

interviews went less well, and since my foster father was with me at the moment, I thought the interview went horribly wrong. I made sure to look the best in the light, while he glowered and hissed at anyone that came close, giving off a threatening aura. I thought that he killed my chance, and he did so on purpose, but he later apologised for being hostile and was genuinely sorry. And even though the interview was disastrous, the email before my eyes confirmed that they wanted me there. I was ecstatic, and the fact that I finally had a wish come true was comforting to know. I never had anything come true before. At the same moment, I heard the door to my apartment click, and three loud knocks signified that my foster father came. I jumped up and ran to the door, almost tripping over a stack of books I left in the middle of my room.

At the same moment, I saw his burly and large figure in the doorway, in the same outfit he wore every time he came, which consisted of black slacks and a faded brown light jacket with a strange symbol on the sleeve. The brown ushanka on his head remained there, winter and summer alike, and I wondered if he ever got hot in it.

"Good morning, Germany," he saw me from the flight of stairs. "Как дела?"

His efforts to speak Russian to me failed, and he just gave me fragments of Russian in his speech, so I could learn a bit of it as well. English was the universal language that all the countries spoke, and it was the language taught in schools, used in meetings, and when countries of different nationalities spoke to one another. The fact that he used English around me made the connection between us feel fragile, since he didn't know it as well as he should. He had a very distinct accent, and sometimes it felt like he was always mad. When he spoke in Russian, he had expression, softness, and a warmer tone of voice.

"Хорошо," I said, trying to show that I did in fact know what he said, even if it was minimal. He looked at me and cocked his head to the side. A sign that something was good. I never respond in Russian if I feel sad, lonely, or just tired.

"What is it?" He asked me, taking off his thin brown jacket and

hanging it in the empty closet that I never use. I didn't need a closet so big, and I couldn't reach the hangers anyway, so I folded my jackets and coats into bags, and put them in drawers.

"I got accepted to the school," I said while he was fumbling with the hanger. I noticed when I said those words his hands shook in fine tremors, but his face expression remained the same.

"Really?" he asked, finally closing the door to the closet, and the click of the door resonated in the almost empty living room. Save for a battered couch, a table, a weird fireplace looking thing, and a painting, there was nothing to see. "And you...accepted, I presume?"

"Of course! It is the opportunity of a lifetime," my eyes widened at the fact that he thought I would back down to go to his old school. It was the IUUC, being compared to a national technical school with a number for a name. Only my foster father, the USSR, could make such an assumption. He shrugged, and then went through the doorframe to the kitchen. In it was just an old fridge, a microwave that I was gifted by someone, and a gas stove with only one burner. The sink was dry, and I only used the tap for water, since I only had two plates, a fork, spoon, knife, cutter, two glasses and a mug. All of the dinnerware was kept in the cupboard, which stood above the stove. Right next to it stood the pantry, which was full of cans of beef and pork. Not that I liked any of that stuff, to me it looked disgusting. Once USSR made me buckwheat mixed with canned beef, and called it "kasha Greek style". I almost gagged at the smell, but he ate the meal without any problems. He said that's what they ate in the Army. I'm not one to argue on that point. USSR was a tough retired veteran who wouldn't take no for an answer. He believed that younger people shouldn't interfere in the business of adults, and children have freedom within certain guidelines. His forms of "consequences" we're nonetheless harsh, and it was easy to bring him into a bad mood.

Now my foster father works as an engineer at development plant, and he manages the politics of his large territory singlehandedly trying to weasel out some more from other people as well. He put his children in charge of each subterritory to make things easier for himself. I unfortunately, am "incapable" of governance, and I have to let USSR take the lead. I don't mind it that much, but a little

more freedom might be good. I haven't meet a lot of people, but when I was a little boy, I used to travel around the world with my real biological father, who campaigned for his cause by starting conflicts with everyone who didn't comply. One who would do absurd things and glorify seemingly good things, but the atrocities were blocked from my view. I never knew that what my father did was so bad until I glimpsed at it myself. I was overcome with a pang of sadness, guilt and anger. By then, of course, it was too late. In a flash, the tides turned, and so did my life. Death extinguished my father's candle, but let mine burn. I still have a lot of wick left too. Since the age of nine I have been left in the clutches of superpowers, all at each other necks for the land my father left me. Some young and fiery and inexperienced, some old, stoic and traditional. I guessed that it was "traditional" to care for children, because I had three guardians, and only one seemed to care if I had clothes on my back and if I was starving or not.

"Hmmm, I guess so," USSR replied without any emotion. His voice cut through my thoughts like an arrow, and it took me a while to register what he said until he looked at me with a quizzical stare, and I snapped back into reality.

"Sorry?" I replied, embarrassed that I had to make him repeat the statement.

"I guess so," he replied with more force in his voice, and started to unpack the contents of the bag he had by his side. "But, ah, never mind,"

He waved his hand as his face scrunched up as if in pain, and he shook his head. He always did that when somebody said something that worried them about him, like his smoking addiction, and he would wave it off. If he didn't see the problem, it's fine. Unfortunately the problem is in the smoke itself, right behind his mighty figure. He didn't let me give my opinion on the subject, and if I asked him to stop smoking more than once, I was slapped lightly on the back of my head. It wasn't painful, but it was jarring. By now, I was used to the fact that he took out a cigarette at the bus station, or at his workplace.

"Never mind what?" I asked, which was brave of me to do so. His

actions were not to be questioned under any circumstances.

"You wouldn't know..." He growled as he set the last of the food into the fridge from the bag and then went to sit down on the couch, just to look at the blank wall in front of him. He sighed, which he did often and buried his hands into his face. He didn't do it because he was crying or he was sad. He did it when he was tired or worked up about something. Something involving my university and....

"Папа...." I started with his favourite name that he would ask me to call him. He grunted in reply, not taking his head out of his face and into my view.

"Are you worried about the-," I was cut off by another sigh.

"Smart are you? Just like your...Never mind. That's why they took you, for your brain, not for your ability to work. You'd never survive the plant work. I secretly hoped they'd take you, so I didn't have to see you suffer. And now..." His words came out very uneven and rough. When he spoke fast, his accent came in the way and some of his words were cut out and he ended mumbling in Russian. I almost felt bad. I sat next to him and wanted to hug him, but he might just yell at me for doing so. We didn't live in the lap of luxury. My life wasn't meager, and I wasn't the poorest, but I did see my foster father count his money more than three times in a row. His job didn't pay as much as it should, and I heard he had about fifteen of his own children, not including me. We didn't starve, but I couldn't eat as much as I wanted. I lived separately from my foster father's family, in an apartment along a busy street. USSR would come every other day to check up on me, to feed me, and to fill the fridge for the day afterward. I would just heat up the food he left for the three meals he provided. That was life, along with school, there was nothing else.

"Don't worry, I have applied to this thing called....financial aid. It basically pays for the tuition, and stuff." I explained awkwardly, not making eye contact with USSR. Maybe if he had the money, he could get farther than he was at the moment. But it was always a problem was it?

"You're serious?" he asked, suddenly snapping up, interest in his

eyes. His face flushed a darker red than it was before and I've never noticed, but that's the colour it has always supposed to be, but his face was always drained of colour, from stress, cold, family matters and the ever horrible conferences. After a second, he narrowed his eyes and their normally light hue turned a dark pine green. "They can't take it away, right?"

"No, no, of course not! I applied, and they sent back an email, and it said that they'll pay for tuition fees, supplies, books, train/plane tickets, and anything else that is related to my school expenses." I felt the need to go in depth with my explanation, as to quote the bureau of financial services of the university.

"Oh, yes, okay," he said quietly, then stood up and went to the back door. He see me a little embarrassed by his show of emotion over his financial crisis. I dutifully followed him right to the sliding glass door that led to the concrete slab of my "porch". USSR leaned against the wall, looked at the muddy peisage of my "backyard" which I didn't own at all, and took a pack of belomorcanals out of his pocket. He lit the cigarette and breathed the smoke in. I in the meantime was trying to unsuccessfully close the back door. I finally gave up when he exhaled. The smoke created a steady flow up to the grey sky, where all the smoke from other cars, refineries, plants, exhaust tubes and smokers came up to be. No trees in sight, except our wilting maples around the yard and the old and dry oak tree, which was long but dead. My little bushes that I planted have been growing steadily until a giant truck, led by a drunk driver, ran them over. Nobody cared, nobody cared about anything but their own lives, but maybe that was for the best.

"You'll still live here, or are you going to live in a dormitory?" USSR's question make me leap several centimetres of the ground. He chuckled and then turned his head to the side and looked out on to the route that seemed to stretch for miles. The cars zipped past with unimaginable speed, breaking the speed limit over 30%. USSR never said anything to that, since he himself broke it up to sixty five percent sometimes. The police were too lazy to even go after anyone who sped, and as long as you didn't crash, they would turn a blind eye.

"Eh, I haven't figured it out yet....really," I scratched the back of my

head, and pushed my glasses up again. "What do you want?"

"That's for you to decide, not me." He said flatly, tapping the cigarette lightly so the ash would clear off it. I wanted to say that I need his opinion. Maybe he wants me to stay, for company, or maybe he'll be happy I'm leaving, since he could rent the apartment to someone else, and I'd be off his back.

"Should I live there? Maybe you need this place for...." I waved my hands across the apartment, making gestures that didn't exactly match my words. He looked at me again, his green gaze searching, but he finally gave up, tossed his head back and let out a laugh, that sounded more like a forced bark.

"Just admit it, Германия, you'd be better off over there," he smiled, but it was stretched too wide, and his small yellowing upper teeth showed, which meant it was usually a forced one, instead of sincere. "I'm serious, make friends, people who maybe could take a liking to you, and you won't ever have to see me again,"

"Eh, okay," I was stuck in a dilemma. No way did I want to stay in this wretched place of a home, nor did I want to make my foster father sad. I never wished him evil, he did have a bad temper, habits, and mannerisms, but he did care, unlike all the others who turned to their own devices when USSR stood up to take care of me. But I was almost an adult, and now I think I could fend for myself.

"When does it start?" He asked, putting out the cigarette in the ash tray. "Is it September first?

"Yes, that is the start of the year,"

"Where is this school located?"

"I think Mr. UK has built it on his land," I ventured carefully. USSR was very neutral with Mr. UK and sometimes they would be best friends, others worst enemies. I never knew when USSR was amicable with Mr. UK or not.

"Ah, yes, I see. That's very nice of him." He nodded approvingly. "United Kingdom is a very responsible man."

"Mhmm." I had nothing to say to his comments. I've met Mr. UK during those tiring conferences when USSR had to yell at me for hiding in a closet and then crying all the way to the meeting place. I guessed he was the President of the IUUP, and maybe one of the professors.

"So in two weeks, да?" USSR ventured.

"Yes," I said.

Как дела- How are you?

Хорошо-Good

Германия- Germany

Да-yes

Author Note-

Kasha Greek style is something my own grandfather made me when we travelled to his apartment in a southern Russian city with huge water problems, for the summer. He made me and my brother eat this meal every other day for breakfast, and I personally hated it, while my grandfather raved about it and it's health benefits. I don't know if he made the name of the dish up, or its actually called that, but the Russian name for it is «Каша по Греческий»

Leaving you behind

[image]

It was one of the last weeks of summer, when the balmy hot days became shorter, the mosquitoes stayed longer, the north wind trickled in, and I start to hear USSR's grumbling about his son, Russia, and his autumn melancholy setting in. Apparently, it was a problem that his son had every year, and would mean that USSR would spend two weeks each month never visiting me to coax Russia out of his mood and bed. He would just send me food by mail at that time. But this year was different, and in a way, for me and USSR's real family. He spent more time with me, helping to pack things I wanted to take along to the dormitory, and what he could sell off at the market. I also purchased all of my books and supplies ahead of time, and the Finance director sent a reimbursement check a day later. My father muttered something about me keeping it, but I stuffed it in his jacket pocket afterward.

I was going to fly by plane to Mr. UK's island, and even though I flew before, this was my first time travelling alone. USSR finished labelling the last box, and placed it next to all the others waiting outside my doorstep. The courier would transport all of the parcels to the dormitories, and all I packed into my suitcase were some clothing, essentials, a charger, my phone, a pen, and extra glasses, in case mine broke. USSR offered to drive me to the airport, which I accepted. He was going to rent the apartment out to other people who were interested, and said that I might as well live in his own home for the summer.

"Готов?" He asked me, standing outside and smoking again. This time he had a new pack, and he placed it into his black messenger bag that was slung casually over his shoulder.

"Готов," I answered back, and he made a bowing motion in the direction of his car. He stubbed the cigarette out on the driveway and signalled to the courier that they were leaving. I opened the passenger door of USSR's beaten up «Lada» and placed my handbag

on the seat next to me. USSR haphazardly swerved out of the driveway and then rocketed down the street to the outbound highway. Surprisingly, today he didn't feel the need to break the speed limit, but he did merge lanes randomly, almost colliding with half of the cars on the road.

"Watch the road, idiot!" USSR growled at the car that just swerved out of their way in a matter of time. "I don't know what you're doing, daydreaming?"

The interior of his car was lined with old faux leather that was worn, stained and scratched. The handlebar had a bad Russian word written on it with a marker, and there was a crumpled piece of a дневник lying on the floor with a little 2 and a complaint written in red pen. When I shifted myself around, my hand came into contact with an unpleasant substance right in the middle of the two passenger seats. I sighed, and took out a handkerchief from my pocket to wipe off the awful stuff.

"Sorry Германия there might be some gifts Kazakhstan left for me to find. I'm sure you found them for me," he chuckled. "He's a bit car sick,"

"Heh, I guess so, but it's still disgusting,"

"Nothing I can do about it. Nobody except my three oldest likes my Greek style Kasha." I then silently forgave myself for being angry at Kazakhstan. I personally also wanted to get rid of the contents of my plate when that particular dish was on the menu.

"Cleaning this dump will be a pain," he said out loud, but I'm sure it wasn't for my ears. I mopped up the rest of the mess, which wasn't as much as I expected, and wrapped a cellophane bag around it, so I didn't have to touch it again.

The landscape changed gradually as we moved up north on the outbound. The cheery fluttery maples with green leaves turned to stout and prickly pines who only bent to the winds command. Every so often a rock or a cliff would be jutting out of the dark green land, the sharp orange and browns intermingling with the greens of the trees. It was putting me to sleep, the rocking of the car, the whistle

of the wind from the window USSR opened partially, and the hum of the tires on the ground.

"We're almost there," He called to me, and woke me from my doze. Indeed, we were. The nice land of pines were gone to reveal a smokestack filled city clogged full of dust, dirt, smoke, swearing, yelling, swerving, hateful glares, cold shoulders, regret, sorrow, and of course, ever opportunity. The city was large, noisy, crowded, bustling, and with a sense of purpose. You couldn't stand in the middle of a city admiring the view or thinking. I knew that the IUUP was in a city too, but the city that I knew harboured bad memories. He took me and one of his children, Ukraine, to the city, and I immediately got a face full of mud from a speeding taxi when I wandered too close to the road. The traffic lights were like clockwork, and the tide of people harmonizing with the swells of the cars, the lights, the words, the signals and the life of the city itself. It was alive, it's heartbeat the cracking of shoes on pavement, it's breathing was the exhaust from the machinery, it's words were the ones of the crowd and it's actions the billboards flashing across the large skyscrapers.

"Don't worry, I'm not just going to drop you off," USSR looked at me through the mirror, his green eyes making contact with my auburn ones. He must have seen the fearful look as a scanned the surrounding area. He got off the outbound, and I heard the characteristic scrape of metal against concrete and USSR's swear as the car hit the curb.

"That's the second one today," he complained. The signs for the airport were near, and they whizzed past me, as my foster father decided it was time to break the speed limit. The airport parking lot was very close, but since it was with a fee, USSR circled around to find a free lot to park in. After two circles around, we found one, on the verge of collapse too. He parked his car in an empty lot and stopped the engine. All the sounds of traffic and people echoed across the lot and magnified the sound by ten. USSR locked the car as soon as I came out and we walked to the airport lift. It was made of thick glass and it bring us to the main, loud level of the airport. Terminal D, the sign read, and USSR pointed to the entrance where people started to gather around. It was the gate to the checkpoint

where I would finally leave on my own. I was able to make a hard copy of my tickets, and the only thing I needed to do was say goodbye. I imagined this to be one of the easiest parts of the whole trip, but it turned out to be the hardest. For some reason, my hands felt cold and numb, and they clung to USSR's coat, and wouldn't let go. I couldn't tear myself away from him, and he smiled a bit sadly.

"I never had a problem getting away from my father," he chuckled. "I was actually happy to leave."

"I thought it would be easy," I whispered.

"Maybe not?" He smiled. "Since I'm renting your apartment out, you're coming with me in the summer."

I already knew that, but it seemed to calm me every time he said that. The sound of chatter reflected off the hard walls and reverberated through the tiled floor. Multicoloured plasma screens were on one wall, the advertisements kept scrolling one after the other about useless luxury items.

"Правда?" I asked again.

"Да, давай, you can't be late," He said softly, and pryed my fingers from his coat. I picked up my bag and adjusted my glasses, and left for the checkpoint. I could see USSR putting his hands in his pockets and then he waved to me one last time.

"До скорого, время пролетит!" He yelled to me, and then turned his back and left, becoming one of the masses of people bustling through.

"Bye," I said softly, and turned to the checkpoint, my adrenaline buzzing inside me. A new lifestyle was surely going to be implemented, and I had to mentally prepare myself for new demands, new people, and new places. This was going to be one ride for life. I knew it wasn't going to be the same ever again.

Готов-ready

Дневник- a daily grade record keeper book-used in Russia

Правда- really/truly

Да давай- Yes, come on

До скорого, время пролетит- see you soon, time flies.

Unexpected People

[image]

After an uneventful flight, train and ferry to Mr. UK's island estate, I had a little jetlag, but most of it was ebbing away, eaten by my adrenaline and excitement. I didn't even have to ask anyone for directions, since there were signs that showed where the IUUP was, which was great, since I wasn't the best at talking to people and strangers in general. I felt it was rude and I personally had no courage to approach a bustling crowd or a lone smoker. The sky was grey on this morning, and only some of the strongest rays of sunlight could penetrate the thick numbers clouds. It still looked like it was going to rain, and I walked with a purpose, and soon I saw an old gothic building with a small plaque reading-IUUP.

"Great," I heard somebody behind me, and I almost jumped half a metre in the air. The person behind me laughed warmly, and I whirled around to see the person behind me. The person looked very familiar, but I couldn't name him. He had a green stripe on the left, white in the middle, and red at the right. He wore a three quarter sleeved that was a light ivory, khaki Capri slacks and a brown rucksack. He tipped his light brown hat to me politely.

"Hey Germany!"

He seemed to see no hint of recognition on my face, and looked momentarily offended, as if I should have remembered him from somewhere.

"Who are you, again?" I said sheepishly, embarrassed at not remembering him.

"It's your friend, Italy, remember? We were the best childhood friends." He smiled again, and put his hand out for me to shake. I took it timidly, and as soon as I did, he pulled me in for a tight hug. I suddenly felt how cold my skin was, against his warm and sunny one. "I missed you, Germany! How's life?"

"Um, good," I said, since I didn't know how to go on. He did indeed look like the Italy I was friends with when I was little. His cheeks had a rosy colour to them, along with little freckles, which also adorned his forearms. He had a little cheek about him.

"Really? With you and family and all?" He cocked his head to the left, and his mouth moved to a frown. He seems to choose his words, like he didn't want to offend me.

"Well, for me it was, well, alright, not the best, but you know, I lived," I said simply, not elaborating the details. Italy was quiet for a moment and then shook his head vigorously, and looked at me. His eyes reclaimed the exited sparkle of when we started the conversation.

"Sure, I mean if you're happy and all," he finished. "But more importantly, what school are you going to? I mean, inside IUUP?"

"Economics, or you know math,"

"Ah, then I won't really see you," he smirked. "I kind of thought you would do something with numbers,"

"How about you? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the Music School. My father wanted and then so did I." He gestured to the tattered green leather covered case. "I've had to do millions of auditions, scale memorization, harmony and melody theories, as well as sit-down paper exams, and these interviews too. How horrible."

"How were your interviews?"

"Horrible too. Really, I had to beg my father to come to the interview, even though he point blank refused to go on a plane, so we got a ship to come here."

"Well, I can't believe were here though," I tried to change the subject, before Italy could talk his head off. I was starting to remember his personality, his talking manner, and even though we were children back then, Italy hadn't changed as drastically as I would have thought. Now I could remember his childish manners,

sunny view of life, and ambitious plans for the future in his welcoming and friendly warm firelit brownish-orange gaze.

"Yeah, I never would have tried unless my father yelled at me to do so." He mimicked the face of what looked like an old man lecturing the young generation. "Think about your future-he said. I know, I know, it's important, I understand that, but I need space, you know?"

"Hmmm," I said with absence of interest.

"But Germany! It's so good to see you!" He jumped back to the present addressing me fully. "I assume you'll be in a dorm?"

"Yes,"

"Hope your flatmate is okay," Italy said. "Since I'll be on the Arts side of the campus,"

"I wish you were my flatmate," I half muttered, but Italy heard me and positively beamed. He wrapped his starch white arms around my neck and hugged me. "Don't worry, we'll see each other at school events and things like that. And I bet you'll make your own friends too."

"Don't count on it," I sighed.

"You're just like your dad," Italy commented. That really took me aback. Me? Like my father? Everyone who met me, ante-bellum and post, always said I wasn't even close to my father in terms of personality. I didn't have ambitious drive, I believed in second chances, and I was, how Italy's father once told mine, "weedy and weak". I was definitely taller than my father, who, if alive, would only reach my chin, and I wasn't particularly stout or anything, so the description that Italy's father gave was pretty accurate. I wasn't as offended as my father, who fumed for hours after that phrase was said, but I never gave it much thought. Really, I was a little boy, and had a bunch of clouds in my head, and thought that manifestos were a type of plant in a garden.

"Oof, the time!" Italy suddenly jumped and almost crashed into a

girl who was peering at the sign. "My apologies," he said hastily.

"Oh, it's my fault, actually," she said quietly. She was tall, but heavy set, with a thick coat around her arm and a black scarf with little red hearts on it woven around her neck. She had a small suitcase and a matching backpack, and a name was written in fluorescent orange a cross a baggage tag on her case. She had a determined and shy facial expression, and but her cobalt eyes were full of scepticism. Her red face was strikingly cut with a horizontal white cross, but that wasn't what made her different. The aura that she radiated was somehow different than Italy's, or anyone else I had meet. It was warm and sweet, but at the same time icy and cool. She blinked twice innocently in my direction, and then huffed and consulted her map.

"What's your name?" Italy abruptly broke the silence.

"Denmark," she said simply, and didn't even turn her head up from the paper. "I'm a second year student here."

"Really? Second year?"

"Yes, but there is a new addition to my school, so I need the map," she finally folded the map into the lightweight brown jacket she wore. "I don't know why, it's pretty unpopular."

"Do you know where the meeting place is?" Italy said for me.

"Yes, I'll lead you there. You look as lost as first years." She snickered, but not unkind.

"As a matter of fact, we are," he said simply. "I'm Italy, and this is Germany."

"Hi," she said to me again, and she turned on the spot, not looking back to see if we were following. She led us under elaborately carved arches and passages all with mythical beasts and long lost heroes. The faces carved in stone were mostly angry or hostile or just in despair. The spires and towers were on each building, and each unique and different. Stained glass and stone were the main materials used to make the prestigious university, and there was no

lack of it, as there was painstaking detail in each of the Windows, walls and archway.

"This is the main part of IUUP," Denmark started to talk, and simultaneously look at her phone messages. "The science and mathematics buildings are on the east side, the Arts are in the west, humanities are in the south, and the gardens are in the north, along with a small Divinity school. It's very simple, and easy to follow. Some of the older students can show you where to go, they love helping first years, my own brother just goes out of his way, but he's a professor, so, he would, but at the welcome speech, you'll hear what the headmaster has to say and all."

"It's Mr. UK, right?" I interjected. Denmark looked back at me, her blue gaze searching, but overcome with shyness, she didn't speak her mind.

"Yes, it is. He also teaches English, one of the required first year courses." She said. As soon as she did, a tall man in a dark brown blazer with elbow patches and grey slacks came up to Denmark and hugged her. She enthusiastically hugged the man back, and she chatted with him for a bit in their own language. The man was taller than her, and he looked like he belonged to the staff by his looks. His skin was blue, with the same cross marking as Denmark, only yellow. He promptly waved her a goodbye after their talk, and hadn't seen me or Italy.

"That's my brother, Sweden. He's a professor here." She felt the need to explain. They fell back into silence, and finally came up to a large building with a huge glass pane for a door and the whole entire wall was stained glass. The plaque read 'school meeting hall', but it said the name too, and Denmark confidently pushed the door open, without letting me read the hall's name. We followed her hastily. The blue carpeting muffled our footsteps and suitcase wheels, and the walls were painted a serene light blue, like they sky dotted with little clouds. Tiny windows protruded from the high walls and looked down on us. Denmark went inside a room labelled 'amphitheatre'.

"Hello miss Denmark, how do you do?" A man called from inside. Denmark waved and laughed at the man, and skipped down the

stairs. The vastness of the room was unimaginable. It was shaped like half a globe, the stage with the podium in front, and the rows of seats coming up to where we stood. The whole theatre roof was transparent glass, like a dome. The man who was now shuffling papers waved at Denmark, who waved back and set off to meet him. As the theatre was empty, me and Italy went as well. The man was relatively young, and he looked as young as Denmark, but by the manner that she adressed him was with high respect, and that showed that he was either a staff or a very advanced student.

"These are first years, Italy and Germany," Denmark introduced us to the man. He was wearing a white lab coat over a dark blue sweater and dark jeans. His face was playful and horizontal stripes of red, white and blue adorned his face. His eye colour was red, not a common colour to see, but it wasn't exactly rare. Rarest was pink, black and heterochromia. He set his papers down and stretched a hand out and shook our hands.

"Hey, having a hard time not calling you 'kids'," he laughed. "Old habits die hard."

"Hello," Italy said first, and then I replied with the same greeting.

"I'm Professor Netherlands," he continued. "But that's a mouthful, so I like the name 'Holland' as well."

"Nice to meet you," I said curtly.

"You teach, sir?" Italy asked. "I mean..."

"Yes, I do, I teach Chemistry here," Professor Holland smiled again. "I'm the youngest of the staff. I joined this year. Denmark knows me as a friend, so it's awkward now." Denmark giggled and then turned to the door, where a trickle of people started to come. Professor Holland turned to the crowd and spoke into the podium microphone.

"Hey guys, welcome. If you could move up front, that would be great, thanks," then he added to us. "Anyways, better start, nice to meet you guys again, Germany, Italy, I'll see you soon. An Dane, I'll come around fifteen o'clock, you know, when UK is up to it."

"Thank you," me and Italy chimed, and we took seats in the second row.

"Bye Neth," Denmark said, and quickly disappeared into the throng. The whole theatre was now full of chatter, noise and shuffling. Several other staffers were walking across the podium and talking to each other. The tall blue man that Denmark called Sweden walked up to the edge and sat down, his legs dangling over the edge. He looked at the crowd and back up to the top of the dome. A light drizzle started to drop onto the dome and it made a little splattering sound on the glass. Italy fumbled with the straps of his large case, trying to get it under the seats without success.

"What's in it?" Another student in back of us asked.

"A cello. It took so much effort to bring it here, but it's a prize winner." Italy responded.

"Cool. I can't play to save my life." He laughed, turned to his phone, and put in earphones. He bobbed his head to his music and didn't continue the conversation.

"So many people here, Germany." Italy turned to me. "You just need to find the right ones."

Meeting Others

[image]

"Unfortunately for me, I can't find things." I laughed. Italy smiled and shrugged back.

"You never know. I made a friend during my interview, and I hope he got in."

"See, Italy, friendship comes naturally to you. Not me, I have this irrational fear or I think nobody wants to meet me or my 'family'." I said.

"I beg to differ," Italy argued. "It's not your fault. You're a different person."

"Some think not."

"I do." He finished and craned his neck to look at the crowd. "Where is he?"

"Your new friend?" I asked.

"Yeah, he applied for music too, but I'm doing classical strings, while he'll be doing electrical modern."

"Sounds hard, maybe there was a lot of competition."

"Oh Germany, there's a lot of competition everywhere. It's IUUP after all." He commented. "Oh! There he is!" Italy waved frantically at the crowd, and signalled for one person to come over. Finally two people came out and sat in the row behind us. Italy started to talk with the taller boy who was carrying a bunch of metal equipment and had headphones on his neck. His face was white, save for a red and blue ying and yang, as well as black markings on four sides.

"Germany, it's him." Italy introduced me. "Germany, this is South Korea. South Korea, this is Germany."

"Hi," I said nervously. His dark brown eyes reminded me of pine trees in the dark. He wore casual clothing, a tee shirt under a Multicoloured jacket and artistically ripped jeans. He looked like he fit at a pop concert.

"Hey, call me South. You'll be able to distinguish me better, since we share our post fixes with my brother." He gestured towards a seemingly bored boy with a blue face and a thick band of red. He wore a white eye patch with a red star on his right eye. He was reading a small book, but he also had black earphones that snaked across his chest and into his pocket. "North, be polite,"

"Oh, hi," North Korea said gruffly, then adjusted his posture in his seat and sighed. He wore muted colours, many of which were dark brown and blacks. He didn't look as vibrant as South, but he still didn't look bad. They harmonised somehow.

"It great to be here, right?" South continued on. "New people! Gosh, haven't seen a lot of those."

"Yeah," Italy agreed. "Hopefully it will be a good year."

"It was my dream from when I first saw it." South sighed dreamlike. "I never thought that I would make it."

"Yeah." Italy nodded in agreement. "Do you know the structure here?"

"We have 'major' courses and 'prerequisites'." North butted in with his voice. "They are different."

"Difference?" Italy asked, moving his wrist in a circular motion.

"'Major' courses are ones we, well, applied for," South continued for his brother. "So our major courses, Italy, would be music, and then we would go deeper, like classical or modern or things like that. 'Prerequisites' are what we need to take, no matter what. Usually they take up most of our first year."

"Oh," Italy said. "Well, we have four years through."

"Technically eight or more." South corrected him. "We need a four

year degree, and then we have to apply again for the Master's degree."

"And if you want a doctorate, be prepared to apply once more and defend your dissertation." North smiled at Italy's shocked face. "But it's not required. You can go work with a four year or Master's too. A Doctorate degree is pretty hard to get, especially since you need to make a thesis paper and then defend it in front of others."

"Sounds complicated. I think that someone ought to help us with careers and everything."

"So these prerequisites?" Italy continued.

"Prerequisites are a pain, but I guess we only really need a pass." South looked at his timetable for classes. "About mid year we can drop some of them."

"English, a science credit, a music credit, a math credit, a culture credit, technology credit and everything else is electives." Italy looked at South's paper. "So any kind?"

"No. In each category, you pick a sub topic." North suddenly interjected. "We'll all have to take English, and then we pick a type of Science, math, ext. So you could do one in science, like Biology or Physics or something like that."

"Thank you," South said politely. "But we knew, North."

"I thought you needed clarification." He grunted.

"Where are you going to major?" Italy see me unfazed with North's passive aggressive behaviour.

"Eh, mechanics, or chemistry. Unstable atoms, radioactive isotopes, that kind of thing." He said. "Not sure though. Maybe acting."

"Acting? Arts?" Italy asked.

"I'm kidding. I'm sure you heard the sarcasm in my voice." North cracked a small smile.

"Wow, you made North smile, respect." South looked surprised and happy.

"Not for long." North went back to slouching in the seat, his dark brown eye went back to scanning the book he was reading.

"Well you still did." South turned to Italy. "That's a rarity."

"How about you Germany?" North finally closed the book, his dark gaze rested in me. "Where are you going? Know your foster father, he's tough." Suddenly the two and a half pairs of interested eyes turned to me.

"Eh, well, I'm kind of like North, I have some ideas. You know, math, maybe economy..."

"You look 'mathy'," South giggled. "Not to offend you or anything. I only know another person who wears glasses, and he's really a stickler for rules."

"That's okay, my foster father wanted me to do engineering." I said offhand. But the Korean brother perked up at my comment.

"You disobeyed him?" North said, eyes wide.

"Eh, no. I didn't. He told me to go for what I know. He said everything but drama, which I can't do."

"Oh, I thought, you know, you openly said 'no'." South sighed. "But I guess if he said so, yeah."

"Mhmm," North nodded.

"I think they're about to start." Italy gestured to the podium, where most of the staff had converged and a middle height man with the Union Jack on his face stood up and cleared his throat. I knew that was Mr. UK, but if I didn't, the atmosphere around him radiated respect and authority. He wore a formal suit, accented with a deep red tie. He also had his signature top hat which he tipped back on his head. One word rung in my head when I saw him: sophistication. He cleared his throat, and the whole theatre stopped the chatter. North put his book in his case, Italy stopped fidgeting

and South sat down next to his brother.

"Hello students, and welcome to the International University of Unified Partnership."

Flatmate

[image]

"Welcome everyone to the most prestigious and prominent university on the globe. All of you have come here because of your brilliant intelligence, undying ambitions, unique personalities, famed doings, and unsurpassed devotion to the Sceinces, Arts, Maths, Technologies and Cultural Awareness. Each and every one of you has had to overcome many obstacles, whether you realise or not. You have proved your strength and loyalty from hardships in the past, and we shall move on to a greater era, fostering peace between the broken, the divided, the weak, the desperate, the old and the young, and now we stretch out our hands to bring solace to those who need it most. We built this school on moral principles, seeing that it was needed to unite generations and people once more, to overcome fear, NLP, false accusations, and influence of outside forces. We need to understand each other, therefore not only creating lasting friendships, but eradicating the notion of fear from the unknown. We only really only fear the unknown, and to banish this unknown we must ask questions, study and delve into the unknown. That is the only way. Unite. Link. Communicate. And Dive." Mr. UK finished his speech, and the whole theatre went up in applause. "Thank you, dear students." He said over the din. Once the chatter and clapping died down, he stepped up again.

"Well, a more informal hello to you all. My name is Mr. UK, I am the headmaster of this institution. I am also the English professor, and I know I'll meet everyone personally, since it is a required class." He nodded to another teacher, who stood up and cleared her throat before standing up on the podium.

"Hello students, my name is Professor France, I teach drama and other arts courses here at IUUP, it's very nice to see you all here, at the start of autumn term. It's an exciting time in your lives, since this is one of the last stages of not having much responsibility, but free reign, at last, am I right?" Several murmurs and chuckles echoed across the room. Some people nodded and laughed as well. Professor France had a grey uniform blazer over a silly frilled white blouse with lace intricate patterns, and a black skirt. The part of her dress that stood out were her scarlet shoes, that see me to dim out the rest of her. She had a plump and kind face, and she wore a little black beret on her head. She looked confident but at the same time, funny.

"When I was your age," she continued. "I know it's hard to believe, I have children of my own now, right here too. But I was a young woman, before this wonderful school was founded, and I felt free, but also alone. I lived alone, ate alone, walked alone, and I was alone everywhere. I was scared to go up and talk to people, and when they came to me, I was scared that they wouldn't understand me, or I wouldn't understand them. I took me years to understand that you just need to try, never give up, and always have the want to move forward, into the future. I think the best that this school will offer you, students, is the chance to meet each other, and forge friendships in a safe haven without fear of lack of understanding. You hold it all in your hands my students." Several students stood up to give her a ovation. As she sat down with the other staff, one by one each introduced themselves and soon people were getting up and shuffling to the exits.

"If you still need a dorm key, come here!" Professor France announced through the microphone. Italy hugged me and said goodbye, only after we exchanged phone numbers and he checked if it was correct.

"See you soon, Germany!" He said, and him and South left. North stayed with me to retrieve a dorm key.

"Ah, Germany, Germany," Professor France said. "We've met before!"

"Mhmm," I nodded back.

"We don't have you separated by year, more by subjects," she explained, consulting her chart. "Ah, yes, here." She fished out a key with the number two hundred and one [201]. " So you are going to be in the Science Sector, that is where your dormitory is and where your school of science is located, since after you've finished prerequisites, you'll spend most of your time there. There are four dormitories per Sector, I marked your dormitory on your map." She pointed to the map, and then gave it to me. "I hope you don't mind being with an older student." She probably caught my falling face and then hastily added. "He's very nice and calm. His name is Finland, and he's a good person. I assure you that dorm switching can be done in two weeks, so if there is a real problem, we can fix it."

"Alright, thank you." I nodded, took my bag and map that Professor France gave me, and set off.

Th dormitories were at four ends of the campus. One at the Northern, Southern and Eastern and Western areas of the large and expansive campus. I consulted the map, and I saw a little black dot on the Eastern side, with my name on it. Professor France must've added a note for me already to show me where to go, along with a red dot to show where I was, the United Theatre, it was called. I set down to the east wing of the campus, and soon the old gothic style building became red and new, made from bricks instead of concrete, but maintaining the style that the school set. I noticed as well that the main school wide lobbies and meeting places were all at the Northern most, while the rest were scattered across the campus. Only the Cultural Majors had dormitories in the north, and below the main buildings. The buildings on each side were tall, and each looked exactly like the other, brick with stark white add-ons, designs, statues, gargoyles and dragons. I soon saw a very richly decorated iron gate that read "Birch College". It had little birch trees engraved on the gate. I looked at the map, and it read that each dormitory is named after a tree, and I belonged to Oak College, not Birch. I saw that it was more North and west of all the others, and I set out there, until I found it. The gate was less elaborate and dainty than Birch, but it had thick bars and it seemed that nothing could make it move. The placard on the top, as well as the coloured wood poster on the side of the building read Oak College. I fished out my

key, which had a card on it as well to open the heavy gate. On the side of the building next to the poster was a number pad and a card slot, into which I inserted the card, and I heard a click in the gate.

"Yay," I half muttered, and with a grunt, I opened the iron gates into the dormitory. There was an archway into the quite large round cross between a patio and a garden, with windows facing into it. The handsomely carved oak wood doors at four ends of the round garden. I went to the west door and opened it, surprisingly it was unlocked. The stairway was darker than I was used to, with only a small lantern at the bottom with metal boxes I assumed to be used for mail. My room was on the third of the three floors they had. I trudged up the steps very noisily, but the carpeting on the third floor muffled my footsteps. There weren't a lot of rooms, and I could easily count them, as there were only four. I guessed that there were only twelve rooms in each college, therefore each Sector only had about ninety-six students. Not many, considering the sheer size of the university. I guess they do only take the best.

The door to the room was already opened, so I assumed that Finland was already there. My suspicion was correct, but my eyes fell on the room around first. The room was much better than it was described in the welcome package and how USSR described his stays in dormitories. The room was set up like a rectangle, there was a bunk bed in the nearest corner, a balcony overlooking the gardens, a large mahogany desk, and a large closet with a divider at the head of the bunks. I could see two adjacent rooms that I assumed were the restroom and kitchenette. The bottom bunk was already occupied by whom I assumed to be Finland. He looked very mellow and was listening to music out of a pair of wireless earphones. His dress was casual, and he wore a light blue windbreaker over a black tee shirt and a light brown leather belt on black jeans. He didn't look up at me, but I could tell he had a white face with a navy cross on it. I wondered if he was related to Denmark, when he looked up at me.

"Oh, hi," he said, his baritone voice was very quiet, and I almost asked him to repeat his words. I quickly shut the door behind me. His eyes were whorls of ice over a frozen sea, and he looked me over twice before standing up and shaking my hand. He was at least

as tall as USSR, maybe taller, but he didn't look threatening, and unlike USSR, he slouched and was thin, compared to my broad chested and straight shouldered foster father.

"Hey, I'm your flatmate," I told him, as his icy hand wrung mine. "My name is Germany. I'm first year."

"Finland. Fourth year." He nodded at my words. Fourth year? That meant next year he would be out doing his Master's degree.

"Why aren't you with another fourth year?" I asked. "I mean, we have such a big difference in age and year. I thought you'd be second or third."

"Hmm, I volunteered, since there was an odd number of fourth years and first years, they needed two to be together."

"I guess that's us then," I smiled.

"Yes," Finland, I found, was a man of few but wise words. He wasn't a talker, but by the way he asserted himself, he looked like he was in control.

"Erm, I'm taking top then?" I asked.

"Yes." He didn't let me go on, so I put my suitcase and bags down.

"You can have the left side," Finland pointed to the closet when he saw me open my case. I nodded in thanks, and noticed that he already put his clothing in the right side of the closet, which was full of clothing in the shades of blues, blacks, whites, Greys and one light pink sweater that looked very new.

"Do you know when parcels are to arrive?" I asked him, since he basically was the oldest on the whole floor.

"Yes. They'll give them to us by floor." He answered curtly. His phone pinged, and he read the message, smiling slightly and addressing me again. "Ah, you know my sister Denmark?"

"Met her briefly."

"She's very enthusiastic. She has 'free' reign at last she said." Finland explained. "She doesn't need to do those prerequisites anymore."

"Are they that bad?" I unpacked my last shirt, when a howl of laughter made my spine tingle. It took me a second to realise it was Finland. When I turned around, he was sitting back on his bed, as if nothing happened, but the corners of his mouth hooked up in a smile.

"Hah. I almost failed English." He continued calmly. "I cannot process how languages work. I know two, and that's already progress."

"Oh, I thought you'd be in some Culture major," I blinked at him, and stowed the suitcase next to the large closet.

"No." He said, and took his earphones out, putting them in his pocket and then staring at his phone for a whole twenty seconds before looking back up at me.

"So you're a," I desperately wanted to know, and the curt way he talked was sometimes annoying. He didn't give more information, just exactly what you asked, no more. He taught me to word my questions exactly, since he would answer vaguely when given a wide response margin.

"I'm a fourth year mathematics major," he narrowed his eyes at me again, and then huffed, sat up, and started to text on his phone. This was a sign that the conversation was over. I was overflowing with questions, but I decided to keep them in for now. The balcony door was open, and some of the rain was on the carpeting on the floor. The balcony itself was covered, but the wind blew the raindrops in my face, splatters covering my glasses, so I stowed them in my pocket. I wasn't totally dependent on glasses, and I only had a minus two and a quarter, but it was annoying and I decided it wasn't worth the hassle to keep on without them. The garden spread out in front of me, and reached very far into the distance, until I saw the thick red brick wall that dived the school and the common land. The clouds were lazily making their way across the sky, and the drizzle became a downpour. Soon I could hear the clanging of the melody of rain and metal. Most of the garden was

more of a forest, the beautiful pines dominant in the group, and a few oaks and spruces were dotted about, which were easily registered by their vibrant oranges and reds, now dimmed by the dusk and rain. I could hear the crickets of the gardens, and the laughter of the students below, as some lamps positioned strategically started to ignite, and shed light on the campus. Away from the garden, the gothic style buildings ate up the greenery and it became a concrete and brick wonderland. Paths spiralled out to different buildings, only to meet again in other places, while many statues of mythical beasts intercepted not only the paths, but hung on ledges, spires and outcroppings. I leaned on the metal railing and watched my breath slowly billow out, and by that time, the sun had set, and the day yielded to the night, and soon I heard a radio being turned on from inside my dorm room. Finland turned on a radio in Finnish and was listening to it only slightly, while bringing in parcels that came from the doorstep. I recognised USSR's scraggly English handwriting and my name and dorm room number were written in neat script.

"See, your boxes arrived." He nodded to the parcels. His own were white and his flag was pasted on, along with the name 'Suomi' written on it. I figured it was his name in his language. "If you're hungry, there is the cafeteria, I can lead you to it."

"You don't want to come?" I asked, stacking the parcels against the wall, while opening one to retrieve a windbreaker jacket.

"I have food for myself, but since you're new, I figured..."

"No, I'd like you to come." He shrugged and took his phone and keys, and swiftly left the room, only pausing briefly to let me lock it. Two doors were open, and the steady flow of chatter came out. The others were locked though, and by the looks, everyone had the same idea to go down to the cafeteria for dinner.

Author's note: Finland is my favourite non-native country, and I think it is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Suomi on paras maa!

Sky Hall

[image]

"Do you have any friends, Finland?" I asked, feeling like a small child next to him, both in size and experience. "You seem...lonely."

"No, I have some friends. Like my brothers and sisters," he didn't slow his pace down, even as we descended down the steps, out of the lobby and into the cold air outside. The streetscape was all lit with the lights and lanterns hanging from either side of the pathways. "If you're talking about unrelated friends, then Estonia, one of my best friends, and Lichtenstein, but he's more of a colleague than friend."

"Oh," I said, to just indicate that I cared. "We're you always at Oak College, or did you move?"

"No, we don't move." He said. "We stay at one college for all four years."

"Do you like it?"

"You can't hate it," he laughed. "Its a tree. How can you not like trees?"

"Well, they're all different." I pointed out.

"You are right. But really, trees look the same to me, so I wasn't really into what college I am going to."

"I found out just today," I confessed. "Is there a major difference between them?"

"Well, yes, there are differences. " He waved his hands around the building. "As you can see, the gates are different, and I've been in

different colleges, they have the same structuring, but they have different wallpaper in the halls, different room layout, but the sizes are the same,"

"So it doesn't really matter?"

"Well, it really doesn't." He looked over the other colleges that we passed. "There isn't much you can do, unless we have in-school sports competition, or to practice for a inter-school meet, you can't really have 'college pride'".

"Oh,"

"It matters more what your sector is, more than your college." Finland stopped at a large hall named Sky Dining Hall and opened the door. "UK is an eccentric person, if you haven't noticed. Money and Mind come together very nicely." As we entered the building, the coldness of the outside faded, replaced with the warmth and smell of food. There were two small restrooms adjacent to the heavy wood door with iron accents that had a plaque on it written 'dining hall'.

"Here goes nothing." Finland muttered. "Do you want to split up?"

"Ehh...."

"We don't have to,"

"I'd rather not." I said. "I'll probably get lost,"

"Your choice. Though there aren't many places to get lost here." With that he pushed the door open, and we entered the noisy and chattering hall. The walls were very tall, and the ceiling above was painted like the night sky, with tiny white dots scattered along the indigo. Four long tables were set up with a huge amount of students, all talking, eating and clattering. The noise was enough to make someone go mad. Finland obviously didn't like it, since he was glowering and frowned upon the scene. The windows were my shoulder width, stretching from floor to ceiling, with each having a stained glass pictures of different types of sky peisages. At the end of the hall there was a type of buffet table with dishes of food from

different cultures. A stack of plates was next to the table, as well as silverware and cups.

"Take some food, and meet me at the end of the table nearest to the Orange window," Finland said briskly and went to sit down. I went over to the table, got a bowl, and scooped some soup into it, along with some rye bread. The soup was thick and creamy orange with croutons floating in it, and it smelled like pumpkins. I made my way over to the west side and immediately saw Finland, who waved in my direction. A group of people were sitting with him, all talking to themselves.

"Hey, again," he said. I recognised Denmark among the group that sat next to him, along with other people who had the same cross shape on their faces and only one with a tricolour like me. "Hei everyone, tämä on Saksaa,"

"Hi Germany," Denmark waved to me. "Again."

"Hello, Germany," another tall woman addressed me politely. Her face looked like Denmark's only she had another thinner navy stripe in the centre of the white one.

"Hi," the last person mumbled. He was dressed in heavy clothing, and didn't look up even he adressed me.

"Iceland, be nice," Denmark said, and took the hood off his head. Iceland was a navy blue colour with a white cross and a thin red one inside the white.

"Tuo on täydellinen," Finland smiled at Iceland. "Iceland, say hi to Germany, he's in your year too."

"Hi, again," Iceland looked up at me this time. His eyes were a striking scarlet red unlike his skin, and they weren't malevolent like his voice, but more introverted and shy. "If you all wouldn't pester me to meet people, I would!"

"Sorry pieni karhu, we don't trust you to do that," Finland smirked.

"Don't call me that,"

"You know you like it,"

"Yeah, right," Iceland huffed.

"Hyi, mitä tuo ruoka oranssia on?" Finland looked at my bowl of soup.

"Finland, please, it actually is good," the woman that looked like Denmark said. "Oh, I never introduced myself, I'm Norway, Master's student."

"She's a marine Biology, or whatever," Denmark smiled.

"Marine Ecologist," Norway corrected. "Fishewoman on the side and during the summer,"

"Its how she gets money for the tuition," Denmark elaborated further. "The prices are really high. Finland scraped a bunch of scholarships together, Sweden worked all the time he wasn't in school, Iceland has a little scholarship and Sweden is going to pay for the rest, lucky Iceland, and I have to work too."

"Poor baby," Norway laughed at her sister. "Don't worry, you can join me on my boat next summer,"

"No way, I'd rather go into the forest alone." Denmark shuddered.

"Hi Germany," the small tricolour boy spoke up. His skin was white, and his face went from light blue, to black to white. He had kind and soft eyes, and he wore a white dress shirt with a khaki knit vest and black slacks. He smiled at he sincerely and sat nearest to Finland. "How are you accustomed to the new lifestyle?"

"Um, okay...I guess?" He laughed softly, which sounded more like an owl churr than a laugh.

"Yeah, my first year was rough, and it took me almost the whole year to get my head down for the clouds. Before I knew it, it was second year."

"Wow, I thought you were a first year," I admitted, his complexion was very boyish and he looked young.

"I'm a fourth year," he smiled. "People say I do look little, but I take that to advantage. It sometimes is a hassle at bars." He nodded to Finland.

"What are you going to major in?" He said.

"Economics," I said.

"Oh, that's nice, well you might change your mind too. I did. I went drastically, from Philosophy to Information Technology," He told me. "Oh, sorry, my name is Estonia."

"Estonia," I repeated. It seems like I heard the name before, when I was very young. "I might've heard your name before,"

"You might have." His eyes sparkled playfully. "Because I know who you are,"

"Really?"

"Mhm, your foster father is my dad," he churred again. "Isn't that funny?"

"USSR is your father?" I was taken aback by that information.

"Yes, he is, fortunately unfortunately," Estonia smiled. "I have learned that sharing is bad, but I had to share with all my siblings, but he's not bad, honestly," he added lastly, looking at my surprised face. "We really didn't have enough to go around, you know? War, being poor already, and having to feed small children is one hard deed. I was glad to get off his back and fend for myself. I think he's better off now, with only four kids to deal with instead of all of us."

"All of you?" I asked. "You don't live in one home?"

"Well, it's kind of confusing to a stranger, or one who isn't in our family," Estonia smiled apologetically. "Us kids are divided into 'adults' and 'little ones'. 'Adults' are all now either working or in college as a third year or older. 'Little ones', on the other hand, are only the four youngest of my siblings." Estonia explained. "By the way, one of them is here,"

"Really?" I looked around the hall which started to empty, and many students had made their way back to their dormitories.

"I mean," Estonia laughed. "Not in the hall, just at the school. There aren't many of us at the school. It's a miracle that he made it in. Carbon copy of father, he is." I had no idea who he was talking about. Finland smirked at Estonia's sentence, and checked his phone again.

"Eh, it's late. I'm going you all," Norway announced. "Bye my little clams, bye Germany,"

"Hei hei," Finland sighed. "Hyvää yötä,"

"Good night," I said.

"Bye Nor," Denmark waved to her sister.

"Have a nice night," Estonia hugged Norway. "Watch out for the wind,"

"Oh I was scared by it once. Now you tease me forever,"

"You fell for that one." Estonia laughed warmly. "But really, I need to go too. Bye everyone, and Finland," he patted Finland on the head, who furiously blushed, but said nothing and just waved back to him.

"We should get going too." Finland said and stood up to stretch. "Hopefully you liked the talk,"

"Yes, it was interesting,"

"Good, I was worried we wasted time," he sighed and walked out of the now almost empty hall, save for a few people still eating. We left in silence and went out to the cold and windy street. The lamps were all now on, and we made our way to Oak in a few minutes. The wind swirled and nipped at my cheeks, and it felt like winter in the beginning of September. After he unlocked the door to the room, he came in, set his phone down, and went straight to the restroom. I settled my things, and unpacked my parcels. Most of the things that were in them were just blankets, since we had to

provide our own, but save for a few textbooks, writing utensils, more clothing, shoes, laptop computer, miscellaneous chargers, a fan, and some pins, I had just a pillow and a letter from USSR. Three letters, in fact. Strange, he isn't one to do these things, and doesn't bother with sentiment or regrets or emotions. But the letter was not in the scraggly writing of my foster father, but in slanted cursive writing that was all too familiar. The wide stretches between words and the small letters all weighed my heart down. I knew whom this writing belonged to. My own father's.

Tämä on Saksaa-This is Germany

Tuo on täydellinen- That is perfect

Pieni karhu-small bear

Hyi, mitä tuo ruoka oranssia on?-Ew, why is that food orange?

Hei Hei-bye bye

Hyvää yötä-Good night

Note- Anyone who speaks Finnish fluently, if you see any mistakes in my writing, let me know, it will be very helpful since I am a beginner Finnish student.

My Beginning

[image]

(The chapter is inspired by the song Storm - Eric Radford. I highly recommend to listen to it while reading the chapter.)

"Россия! Вставай, быстро!" My father yelled, throwing the curtains of my bedroom open, letting the dawn light filter in from my large window. I rolled over and groaned, knowing that it was about five o'clock in the morning and that soon he would open the window to let the cold air in. It was as if summer only lasted until August, and when September arrived, so did the cold, the changing leaves, the days shortened, and so did everyone's temper. I was usually very sad during this season, and father dubbed it my 'autumn melancholy'. As if he knew. I even had my own psychologist to talk to, who was also my older brother, but I didn't feel the need to talk to anyone at all. Then I felt the cold air on my skin as my father took the warm blanket off me. It was like ripping skin. I hate autumn, and I've never told anyone but my father, why. He would wave his hand and laugh.

"Ай! Папа, what for?" I protested. "I'm freezing!"

"As you should," my father crossed his arms and lifted an eyebrow. "How come you can't get up by yourself?"

"Well, I like my sleep," I huffed, and swung my legs off the bed so that they came in contact with the floor at the same time. "I'm not a morning person like you or Belarus,"

"Well get used to it," he said. "Ukraine can't seem to lift himself off

his bed, so I helped him. You can both go run together,"

"Ура," I grumbled and crossed over to my closet to get dressed. I put on some sweatpants and a тельняшка, took my ushanka off my dresser and made the bed.

My family was one like clockwork. We woke at five o'clock, no excuses, then wash, stretch, run, have a sit down breakfast, grab your things, and off to school either on public transport or father's car. I usually walked to the троллейбус stop, then get to the outskirts of the city, then take the metro to the school I go to. Then, after, I could freely roam the city until eighteen o'clock or I could go home by either metro and trolleybus or by begging my father to come pick me up. That was my day to day life, nothing very special. I made a few friends, I made quite a few enemies, but I never did anything stellar or unique. Today I definitely would. I went down the creaky stairs to the double doors of our home. Ukraine was already standing there, his yellowish orange eyes were screwed up from the sun glaring from the windows. He wore some black sweatpants as well and a branded tee shirt. I placed my ushanka on the table next to the doors along with the box full of rocks that Kazakhstan collected and a flower vase with a wilting weedy plant that nobody bothered to take care of.

"Come on Россия," Ukraine muttered at me. "I'm starving," He put on his running shoes on already, and was tapping his foot impatiently on the wooden floor. I took my own worn tennis shoes out of the shelf in the mud room, and slipped them on. They pinched at my toes, and the laces were reduced to stubs, but they didn't fall apart no matter how much I've abused them.

"Let's go," I opened the door and he went out first. Then I closed the heavy wooden doors and we started to run. The wind blew in our faces as we made our way down the steps and on the dirt path of the trail we ran. Father made sure we did so every day, same distance, same time. Our home was large and far away from people on a piece of land that father uses for himself. The house is more like a manor, and it stood alone on a wide expanse of wheat fields that slowly turned to wild grass, then to a dirt road that led to a thick forest and more fields. On the outskirts of father's large territory were little villages of human beings who helped my father

in many things, so we remain very friendly with the local folk.

"Oof, why are you running so fast?" Ukraine complained annoyingly. "I can't keep up."

"Украина, stop whining," I huffed. "I'll slow down a little bit." The little path that went from our home to the far edge of the forest. We ran through the field of wheat in silence, the only thing that I heard was the chirping of the cicadas, the patter of our feet and the rough breathing of my brother as we made our way on the small dirt path winding to the forest, where the path became wider so Ukraine and I could run side by side. The roots came up from under the ground, and mingled with the rocks and twigs that littered the ground, along with a stray empty Pepsi can or a cellophane bag from chips or the likes. It was colder in the forest, away from the sun, here the pines crowded together. When we emerged, I saw the apple tree where we would turn around and make our way back. I stopped and tried to catch my breath.

"Wow," Ukraine commented, looking over the tiny hill where the apple tree was growing. The fields then kept on going, along with the dirt and rock trail, the wheat replaced with waist high grasses on each side. In the distance a hawk cawed, and I heard the wind in the apple tree sound like thunder next to us. Some abandoned construction equipment along with the neck of a rusty crane were laying in the grass, weathered away by the changing seasons.

Just two days ago father expanded our run from the edge of the forest to the lone apple tree on the other side of it. Me, Ukraine and Belarus weren't used to it yet, and it was challenging for us to do it. As soon as the route got easier, father made it go farther, so we'd get used to challenge. He ran in the morning before us, and then he would wake us up, shower and make breakfast. Belarus would usually help him, since she had no problem getting up at four in the morning either. I slumped against the rough bark of the tree, and Ukraine helped as he got entangled in nettles. Unlike me he had no allergic reaction to them, but when I even grazed them, my skin would go from red to pink, and it would puff up painfully and unevenly. Luckily, father was used to me and my skin reaction and had a balsamic cream in the medicine cabinet.

"The winds are nice," Ukraine commented. "I would stay here longer, but I want to eat."

"Okay, I wasn't planning to linger," I pushed myself from the tree, and the wind blew in my face, both refreshing and calming. We headed down back home, through the forest, the fields and the silence, the only thing that was singing was the breeze and it created a beautiful symphony of the wheat and wind, roaming on and on to the edges of the universe. I stopped at our tiny garden on the west side of the house, where the shade of the manor obscured the sprouts of carrots, beets, potatoes, as well as our cabbages, melons and one beaten up corn stalk that was picked clean before we could even see the kernels come up. Horse corn, said Mr. UK, when he looked at our garden one summer day. It was a very small one, with only four sprouts of each vegetable, and one of cabbage and two melons. One of the doors opened and I heard a female voice come out.

"Russia, come on," it cried out. "You'll go hungry!"

"Да Беларусь," I yelled back. "Дай минуту. Я думаю."

"Thinking is for stupid idiots," Belarus laughed. "Papa said so."

"I guess I'm a stupid idiot." I went back to the front of our home and Belarus hopped in front of me. I left my shoes in the mud room and then grabbed my ushanka from the table, and went over to the kitchen which faced the south and was always sunny and inviting, with a large window spanning wall to wall. I washed my hands at the kitchen sink, the water scalding hot and aggravating my recent cuts from yesterday's run where I slipped on a rock from exhaustion. Father preferred to use hot water for dish cleaning and mostly everything else but showering, which he used almost ice. The kitchen table was at the far end away from the window, but near a large picture of two people with their backs turned, herding about a dozen white geese back to the big faded red barn in the distance on the outskirts of a white birch forest with a fenced off perimeter of the farmland. The two people wore denim overalls and held sticks, one of them, the younger by the looks of his height was with a straw hat, while the other held a basket in the crook of his arm. The whole picture gave me a warm feeling of fading childhood

and a hazy dream. The picture overlooked the table, which had a stained white cloth with intricate red patterns on the borders. Since the table was moved against the wall, there was just enough room to fit everyone who lived in the house at the moment. Father sat at one end, and I sat at the other. Belarus sat next to father, Ukraine in the middle and I was stuck with Kazakhstan at my end. By the looks of it, Belarus and father have already set the table and she wore a harassed look on her face, since I was taking my time. Everyone was waiting patiently for me, but it seemed that patience was leaking. I sat down and we did our prayer before our meal. Only us children did it, since father did not believe and was an atheist. The rest of us were Orthodox Christians, and we took our beliefs into our own hands, so did our grandfather, who taught us. After the last line, Belarus looked at our father who nodded, and we proceeded to eat. We all ate in silence, as usual, until father started to drink his coffee and Kazakhstan got talkative.

"Papa," he started.

"Yes?" Father didn't look at Kazakhstan from his end of the table, instead he leafed through yesterday's paper.

"What are we going to do today?" He asked. "It's Saturday, remember?"

"Yes, yes," father sighed, putting down his coffee. "I'm thinking." Belarus looked into his cup and made a face. She once tried the bitter liquid and promptly spat it out, not relishing the flavour. Father called it an addiction, and even though he was disgusted by addictions and compulsions, he still had many of his own, all annoying and usually negative.

Smoking, drinking alcohol and coffee, high stresses, and the spiral down that rabbit hole my father couldn't climb out of, that he would never tell anyone, but everyone still notices, but I give him credit that he's trying. He made the home we live in with his own hands, all by himself, he built his own life by himself, and he educated, worked and raised children by himself. His path was lone and dark, lit only by his own lamp, and he left traces of his story in the walls of the house, his legacy remained, evil or good, it didn't matter. He wrote his story with blood instead of ink, created poems

from sweat, soaked in flames and roses, and composed music from tears that stained memories and brung people to tears, made him run away, scream, yell and turned him cold and angry. He was betrayed three times, each coming closer to his heart, each stabbing more painfully, each he punished, and after each he lost touch with reality for months at a time. I witnessed two of the three, the second was scary and made me lose all trust in not only myself but in the world, where he would just wander endlessly through our fields, not talking, not even registering the weather or reality, just fading away in his mourning thoughts, starving at days at a time, not sleeping at night, instead singing in a cracked voice of an unknown language to me that echoed in my heart during those dark winter days of hunger sadness, pain and just despair, and I became the head if father ever came into such a lapse again. But he emerged, somehow, though the grief, he returned to reality, one dreary rainy day, and came with his hands like ice and his eyes with tears in them, he promised never to let us go, no matter what. He lived a hard life, one that we all have him credit for, the fact remained clear as a mirror. Our grandfather, Russian Empire, hated his son from the start, making his life difficult, making him fend for himself as soon as possible, not even grating him an education, leaving him alone without that support at night, without love. Father chased after that emotion the most, and when he finally regained his level, sorted his immediate problems, he went on that perilous quest for love. As cheesy as it sounds, it was just a sad poem. He married a woman that only looked at his checks and his wallet, grating him many children until she left with a note of goodbye and a divorce paper signed by a pope. After that father started to drink, and he stopped his already little belief in the church which he regained in the fifteen years they lived together. He said that only he made himself, not even God looked out for him. I looked up at father, who was now alone at the table, and I tried to resist tearing up.

"Россия, чего застыл?" Father chuckled, but he had an idea of what I was think of when he glanced at my gaze on the cup and he then stood up and poured the rest of the coffee into an already wilting set of flowers delivered weekly to our doorstep by an anonymous person, who father had probably guessed who it was. He looked out the window and sighed. The table was suddenly clear, and the

dishes were all in the sink. Everyone else was gone, doing their own thing, and father crossed over to me and hugged me tightly. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"No, you won't." I was suddenly crying, surprised at my own self. Why did I have to cry? Why did my thoughts bring me to this state? The autumn always reminded me of our family suffering, of our hardships, of my slowly deteriorating father, of our future, of the past, of people lucky to have their lives not be stained by tragedy, by addictions, by holes so deep that you can't see the ends of, the cold, the blackness of those dark nights.

"Умный ты, Россия," he smiled. "Тебя не обмануть. You will reach high heights. Unlike me, you have a good future. I will do everything I can to give it to you." I hated the cold wind, the swirling leaves, the hardening wheat, the busyness of nature preparing for sleep, the shortening of days, and the afternoon's light filtering in my window on a autumn day. It made me remember. It forced me to face the unknown and it fed me terrifying dreams and genuine fear nestled inside me. How did such a promising day go so wrong? Father held me for a long time. And then he said something to me. A silver tear fell on to the tiled floor and the green carpet.

Россия! Вставай, быстро!-Russia, get up, now!/Russia, up, quickly!

Ай! Папа-Ah!/ow! papa (declarative exclamation)

Ура-yay

тельняшка-The white and navy striped shirt, usually worn by men in the Army as a base clothing.

троллейбус-trolleybus, a popular public transport in Russia, a bus with "horns" attached to wires, directly feeding it energy.

Россия-Russia

Украина-Ukraine

Да Беларусь- Oh Belarus (exasperated way) (I make the translations to be not direct, but to be understood in English, since I do not use Google translate for any of the languages unless I

specify)

Дай минуту. Я думаю- Give me a minute. I'm thinking.

Россия, чего застыл?-Russia, why did you freeze in your tracks?/ why do you look so frozen?

Умный ты, Россия- you're smart Russia.

Тебя не обмануть- You aren't naive/gullible or can't fool you.

I wasn't prepared to write some things in this chapter, but I have, so enjoy, and dive in to Russia's point of view. This part is a bit in the past, right before Russia receives an acceptance letter

Beyond the norm: Being Accepted

[image]

"Эх, Россия," my father let me go after a while. "I won't be going anywhere for a while, so no need to mope around and act like I'm dying."

"Yes, papa." I sniffled. I had wanted to say more, but I bit back my words.

"I want to do some things today. So does Kazakhstan," he started, wiping the last remnants of breakfast off the table. "It's not too late to start those things." With that, he crossed over to the sink next to the panoramic window that spilled light into the white and green kitchen, and he started to wash and dry the dishes. "I want you to go shower, get your cell phone and wear something decent, then come down."

"Yes papa," It was no use to argue. Father turned on the radio that stood on the counter near the sink, and turned the volume up, filling the room with a light and happy tune. I obediently went up the stairs, only to stall on the top. The long hallway had doors on the south side of the house and the north side was open to a sort of mezzanine to overhang the large living room. A small rail made sure that you couldn't accidentally fall down to the first floor, and the long and thin white carpet in the middle of the hall made going across quiet, though there were one or two floorboards that creaked overtime you stepped in a certain place. Growing up here meant I knew how to sneak up and down the hall without being heard, since I knew how the floorboards would react when a force was applied to them. The first door was a guest room, and the plain

birch door had a tableau hanging from the centre, reading "гость". Us children weren't let inside, but when our older brothers and sisters came around to visit, there was always a room at hand. The second was Kazakhstan's room. A miniature flag of his was strung in the middle of the door, the only thing that made his door seem different from the guest's. But inside, it was very much so. Unlike the tidy and neat guest room, Kazakhstan preferred a 'natural' approach, which meant he had a shelf full of all kinds of grasses and bushes next to his window, and the room was painted a serene white with light brown streams near the bottom where the floor met the wall. His bed wasn't big, and was naturally a hand-me-down from Belarus, which came from Ukraine, which came from me, which came from our father. Nothing we have is new, or if it is, it was made by our father or salvaged from somewhere for free.

"Kazakhstan!" I heard Ukraine's shrill shout from his room. "What are you doing? Come back, that's mine!" The door flew open and Ukraine was very angry, panting heavily, holding a giggling Kazakhstan by his foot. Kazakhstan, apparently, shoved something into his mouth, looking rather pleased with himself. "Russia! Tell him!"

"Tell him what?" I asked serenely.

"He ATE my summer assignment!" Ukraine shouted indignantly. "What am is supposed to do now? REDO IT?"

"Yeah, stop yelling," Belarus suddenly opened her door, one decorated with her flag. "I'm trying to decide what to wear, and you're distracting me."

"HE JUST ATE MY ASSIGNMENT!" Ukraine screamed in anger. "PAPA!"

"Успокоися Украина," father's deep voice sounded from below. "Get ready, and then we'll sort it out."

"Mmpf." Ukraine let Kazakhstan go, who gracefully fell on the floor like a sack of potatoes. Belarus laughed, and shut her door in our faces, giggling. Belarus wasn't the type of girl who would dawdle in front of a mirror to check her appearance, and she never turned

down a chance to be rough with us. But she sometimes did act like she was superior and claimed she was our father's favourite, as well as always helping and doing chores first and snuggling up to father, really did make her so, but it meant that the rest of us had to lower our status in family hierarchy. I supposedly have second to most power, since I am the eldest son, but times have changed, and even though we weren't with the times, father was more lenient to liking Belarus over us. Not that he didn't love us or he hated us, it was just a matter of bragging rights among us four. Belarus had a larger bedroom with a big bed that used to be our mother's, but Belarus had implemented her own personality on the room so much that it barely was anything like before. She stuck a poster of an owl and a motivational message next to her dresser which was next to her door. Her bed was adjacent to that and a highly intricate painting of our great-grandmother, Baba Rus, holding a flaming torch into the darkness, illuminating her surroundings. Belarus liked it so much she had it framed and stuck a pink paper cut out of a heart on one of the edges, where she wrote 'Моя бабушка, самая самая'. Except for a long mirror, a table with a green lamp, her spring green coloured room was no different from Kazakhstan, save for having a walk on balcony instead of a French one. Ukraine didn't like having me in his room, which was a light blue colour with a bright yellow bed. He seemed to like his colours, and plastered a large poster of a western pop musician over a painting of our father with him on a hill, waving his flag in the wind. Ukraine also had a cat named мурка, a smoky grey cat with black paws and tail and a white flash on its chest. Мурка slept in Ukraine's room, therefore, his room smelled like cats, wildflowers and the breeze and he kept its bed next to his own and a litter box stood in the corner.

"What are you starting at?" Ukraine squinted at me, tapping my cheek with the back of his hand.

"Your face," I retorted. "It reminds me of our breakfast this morning."

"Well," Ukraine crossed his arms, and stuck his tongue out at me. "You don't look good either."

"I, unlike others, have a brain, and that's what matters." I finally came to my own room and opened the door. The light white lace

shades were billowing in the wind, but the heavy dark blue velvet curtains I use to block out the light, which I do rarely, were still. I tried the lace shades to the curtains and opened the window even more so the room regained the cold temperature that I liked, since I would close it at night, and it would turn warm from my breathing. My room had a navy carpet that didn't cover the whole room, but only covered slightly more area than the bed, so the rest of the floor was wooden and creaky and cold. I had a nightstand with two drawers, a white closet, and a 'levitated' bookshelf, which meant that it was just planks drilled into the wall, stacked with books and other paraphernalia like rocks and pencils and a weird looking doll stuffed with medicinal herbs that was surprisingly nice and I only kept it for its benefits. Unlike Belarus and Ukraine, I had no paintings in my room, but I had a looking glass on my nightstand and I had the second to biggest room after Belarus, which gave me a little more power than my brothers. I picked out a pair of black slacks from all the others I had. It was a matter of cleanliness, not style, and I could hear that for Ukraine it was quite the opposite, and the rummaging could be heard through the wall. I laid the pants and a grey sweater on my bed and left to go shower in the bathroom down the hall. Father believed that the toilet should be outside the house, so he built a shabby looking outhouse near the back. All I say to any guest is, I hope you used the restroom earlier, because this one is a nightmare.

"Russia," Belarus skidded in front of me, right before my hand reached the bathroom handlebar. "Guess what?"

"What?" I said annoyed. "Tell me."

"You're supposed to be excited," Belarus smiled.

"Yay," I said unenthusiastic. "Now what is it?"

"It's for you," she said. I sighed. Belarus was always bouncy when one of her siblings got something, even if they didn't share. It was a weird thing she did, and there was no explanation to her behaviour, but she didn't do any harm, so nobody cared. Actually, they did care, they liked her behaviour.

"Ну, что?" I smiled at her, and she hugged me back.

"I'll tell you when you're finished," she jumped away giggling. My smile turned to a frown. "By the way, when you make that face, you look like papa when he hasn't had breakfast!" She yelled from already down the stairs.

"Ugh," I huffed, opening the door, and starting the cold water. We usually didn't have cold water during the summer, and we always had cold during the winter, unless we heat it up with convection. In the autumn and spring we have the luxury of both hot and cold running taps. I personally liked the hot water, and I could use water that had steam rising up from it, while my siblings would shriek from the heat. The table turned with cold water; I cannot stand the cold water, and it was a source of revenge for my siblings, who didn't pass it up. I liked the cold air, but not cold water. When the shower temperature finally reached according temperature and the mirror on the wall started to fog up, I quickly closed and locked the door to finally shower.

"Россия!" I heard the annoying muffled voice of Ukraine through the door. "Papa wants to talk to you."

"Can't I have some peace?" I muttered under my breath. "I cannot even enjoy showering anymore."

"Россия," the door was pounded on by a weak fist. "Did you die in there or something?"

"Yeah, I did." I growled to myself. "Go away Ukraine."

"Россия," Ukraine adopted his whiny voice, and even through the door it was awful. "Come on, papa will yell at me if you don't come."

"I'm here," I told him through the door, frustration building up. "Tell him- I'm showering, like he wanted me to."

"You're a slow showerer." Ukraine commented. "I'll tell him that. But hurry up, he wants you. It's something very important."

"Life-changing." I retorted sarcastically.

"It is!" Ukraine yelled, by the sound, it seemed, he was already

down the hall.

"Yay. Stop bothering me." I said to myself. Once I finished, I turned the nice and hot water off, and shivering slightly, I whipped a towel off the chair that stood directly in front of the shower and dried myself off. Then I opened the blurred glass window to let the heat out and wrapped myself in the towel and set off for my room, putting the dirty clothing in the basket labelled 'Грязное бельё'. As soon as I closed the door behind me in my room, a knock sounded very lightly on my door. Envisioning that it was Ukraine, I was out of patience.

"UKRAINE! Give me a break!" I yelled, frustrated. "Stop bothering me!"

"Russia," I heard a deep voice from the other side. My blood ran cold, as I registered who it was. Yelling at father was one of the worst things you could do, after breaking something or hitting him intentionally.

"Д-да?" I stuttered, finally finding my voice. Excuses were not for father, he didn't believe in them. He never took the word sorry from anyone. He said that no one is really sorry for their actions, they know what they do.

"I want to-," he started. "No, I need you to talk with me."

"N-now?"

"When you're ready, Russia," he said quietly, and left. I would be killed for sure. Killed then stuffed as a scarecrow to show everyone that that's what disobedience does. Trembling not from the cold of the room, I got dressed, grabbed my ushanka from the bed and walked out, like a prisoner waiting to be flogged. It was impossible to hide that I was coming down, and I wished that the stairs were not as creaky and loud, and my siblings were all talking in the living room, but as I came down the steps, they all hushed and looked at me with round eyes. Even Kazakhstan.

The living room was darker than usual, not from the absence of a window, since light came through the sunny kitchen, but it felt like

all light was sucked from it. Father was sitting in a winged armchair that was right next to the fireplace and the oldest and second largest painting in the house of our grandfather, Russian Empire, who held a sword with a red ribbon on the end and was waving it about over the mighty land he wielded. There were only two of those rich patterned chairs, covered in red velvet and gold threading into intricate patterns of large complexity. The fireplace was large and brick, but it was unlit as well, so only the kitchen shed light into the dark cave. Ukraine sat in the other large armchair with his legs crossed on it, and was was winding a string around his sunflower yellow fingers. Kazakhstan was on the soft red carpet with a wooden horse and a doll, but he dropped the doll on the carpet, which made virtually no sound at all. It felt like I was sinking into the carpet, and wished that is was thick enough to swallow me whole.

"Come on," father stood up from the armchair, throwing the daily newspaper, or the latest newspaper he brought from work, into the unlit fireplace. He then bent over the fireplace, clicked a lighter and the fire came to life, and I could see the little curls of smoke coming from the burning newspaper. The fire brought light to the room, and the shadows danced around the objects in the room, and it illuminated my father's face, and it just made his emotionless face scarier. His green eyes looked like they were ablaze, like a green fire storm. It was impossible to think that he wasn't angry. He motioned for me to come, and my siblings got all whispery and started to point at me. The sense of foreboding and anxiety swept through me. "Россия,"

"I'm coming," I sighed, my morale lower than a vein of oil under rock. Father set off to the room adjacent to the kitchen, but there was only one entry to it through a sunlit white hall with floor to ceiling windows on one side and the longest painting I've ever seen on the other. The painting was very long, but instead of depicting a scene, it showed emotion. Splashes of green and gold hopped merrily about, along with their hues and shades all intermixed and mingling with each other. I wondered why my father kept it, since he detested modern art style, but he once muttered that it was a gift and he would abruptly stop at the name and it would set him in a depressive mood for the rest of the day. The hall led to a room

around the corner, shielded from the main house chatter, with the glass being on two sides and the ceiling, all crystal clear glass. A low level soft couch stood at the back wall, filled with furs and shepra. Father took two wood chairs from the back and moved them closer to the glass windows.

"Here," he motioned in a very calm voice. That was the scary part, since he usually is very calm either he's borderline explosive or placid. "Sit."

"Papa...I'm so sorry," the words tumbled out of my mouth in a fountain, one that couldn't be plugged. "I thought it was Ukraine, honestly, I would never tell at you, it's just I thought...."

"You're a good thinker." Father commented, not even looking at me, but at the sunny and blue sky. He never told me anything straightforward after the war ended. Like he lost the ability to communicate with me directly.

"I-I...."

"A very good thinker," he continued calmly, as if talking about the weather. "No wonder."

"Please," I didn't want trouble, and it just seemed to come to me. My hand automatically clutched the crucifix that I wore on a thin brown leather chain around my neck.

"Russia," he said, looking up at me. "Nothing is wrong. Sit." I reluctantly sat, but it felt I was full of electricity and static. Every move he made, I would jump a little. Then he sighed and moved his hand up and I shrieked and jumped, landing a little away from him. He raised a brow and shook his head. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I lied.

"You can't lie to me, Russia," He said. "Don't worry, you're not in trouble."

"Okay," I whispered, sitting back down, but I was still full of that buzzing electricity.

"I got this today," he started, overturning a letter in his hands which I didn't notice earlier. I couldn't make out the address, since his hands blocked it from view. "It's a letter. For you."

"Oh." I said quietly. I assumed that father would want to read it first. "That's...good?"

"Very." He said. "I never thought you'd make it. I was wrong." With that he gave me the letter, which was torn at the front, indicating that he already read it. The address was the school I applied to for a laugh. One of my friends joked about how smart I was and that I should apply. I laughed at him and said I would. The tests that they had were hard, and since I had no knowing of what they encompassed, I just asked my father to review some stuff with me. We ended up going overboard, and he even whittled down five pencils to teach me some new things too. I applied for my strengths, maths and physics, and I had a knack for building and rebuilding old stuffs I would find, and my father even took me to his plant to make sure I knew how it all worked.

I imagined I would scrape up a decent grade for English and History and then I would drop out to work at father's plant. But I didn't. I stayed all the eleven grades, passed stupid and unnecessary testing and went to boring interviews as well. My father kept telling me all those sleepless nights that we were just wasting time, and I could use all of this knowledge on a block of metal, not at some university desk. My friends all applied to lower end colleges that were vocational, not majorical. They intended to step into the workforce as soon as possible. I couldn't sleep days after the university exams, because it was frustrating, knowing that I failed English and Language Arts but I had a good score on the maths. No competent university would take me. The odds were against me. I was male, I was not financially stable, nobody liked my father, I was the eldest, I was a 'war hawk', I failed English, I didn't fit with the sophisticated society, and I had a very bad personality when dealing with strangers. The university name was embossed on the cover in gold lettering- International University of Unified Partnership-IUUP. A strange name, but the stranger the name, the more it has fame.

"Wow." I whispered, turning over the letter and reading the acceptance form. My name was next to the word 'accepted'. How

very strange, how incredulous. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," father enveloped me in a rare, but loving hug. "I just didn't think you'd make it."

"Me too." I said softly, unable to raise my voice. "It was just...a joke."

"Well, I'm glad you applied, for any reason," father genuinely smiled in my direction. "If you passed this, you have a bright future ahead of you." I wordlessly turned the pages of the acceptance form over and over. One page showed the test results which were obvious to me. A green bar was shown for information technology, physics and chemistry, A yellow for German language, which I took as a Culture course, and another yellow bar for history, and a low red bar for English. I pursed my lips at the English score, but my mood lightened when I saw that I had scored way above average quartile score. A note was attached in well written script, saying that I was excused for the low English score and I would be taking a lower English class for ELL purposes. The timetable was printed out on the next page, along with written information on campus life, colleges and scheduling. My father stood up and stretched, then walked to one specific window that had a handle, and pushed it open. He leaned on it and rummaged through his pocket for presumably a cigarette.

"Ah," he sighed, lighting the cigarette and inhaling the smoke. "Go tell your siblings that we're going to the city. We need to buy some things." The smoke came out of his mouth as he talked.

"Yes," I said and stood up against the slight wind coming from the open window. The wheat danced merrily to the breeze, bowing their heads to the command. Father looked outside blankly, without lingering on one single thing. His eyes didn't linger long on anything, and his hand periodically lifted the cigarette to his mouth, and the smoke was dark against the light blue sky. I left the light room, down the hallway, to the contrasting dark living room, and as my eyes adjusted from the brightness of the veranda to the gloom of the guest room, I noticed the careful skittish movements of Ukraine as he went to sit by the dwindling fire, the avoiding gaze of Kazakhstan, who averted his golden eyes from mine, and the loud

crash of the soapy pan that Belarus had in her hands, slipped from her grip and onto the wooden kitchen floor that stood adjacent to the living room. Her spring green eyes were full of a strange mixture of fear, anticipation and pity. The light from the morning sun barely reached from the sunny and window laden room to the windowless living room that relies on the kitchen to give it sunlight, through the doorway and a large rectangle that was carved into the wall, which had some decorative items like porcelain figurines, a plate, vase full of an essential oil, and clear glasses and carvings.

"So?" She whispered, picking up the dropped pan, and continued to scrub it.

"So what?" I said back. Kazakhstan gasped dramatically and Ukraine almost toppled out of the chair he was in. "What is going on?" I was annoyed with my siblings' behaviour.

"Papa was very surprised," Kazakhstan piped up. "He told us to go get you, and very fast. Like he was angry."

"But you didn't know that." I told my five year old brother. "Right?"

"No." He decided. "We didn't. But papa was very, very, very surprised. That means he's angry."

"So it's okay." I said to him. Kazakhstan didn't respond for a while. Ukraine kept staring at me, and Belarus kept absently scrubbing the already shining pan, while her eyes kept on getting as round as dinner plates.

"So what did he SAY?" Belarus whisper yelled, grabbing my hand with her hot and soapy one. The fire was crackling softly, but I could hear everything, and even the creak of the floor under the thick red carpet was heard in the heavy atmosphere. It seemed as if the large picture of our grandfather blinked as the fire moved the shadows on his face.

"He said," I started. "That I made it in to-,"

"The school?" Ukraine bolted upright, jumping out of his armchair and facing me. "That one that Mr. UK has?"

"IUUP?" Belarus chirped.

"Yeeeees," I said slowly. As soon as I did, Ukraine's jaw dropped, and my clothes got all wet from the hug that Belarus enveloped me in.

"I knew it! I knew it, Ukraine! Russia is the smartest, I told you!" She had little tears that looked like beads in her eyes. Kazakhstan clapped his hands gleefully and Belarus went on to bounce around the room. I was in shock at the elation of my siblings. It wasn't like them to be happy for something I did. But I did feel closer to them, like they cared about what happened to me. It was a warm and bubbly feeling, even if I was sopping wet from Belarus' hug. Ukraine was still gaping at me, and it felt like even the stationary painting of grandfather was smiling at me. It felt like the room lightened considerably, and the fire seemed to illuminate not only the room, but the whole world. I've managed to put myself out of years of back breaking work and literally skipped through the misery that I would've had to endure without a top university degree. I would get through it. All to help them. My family.

Ех, Россия- Oh Russia

гость-guest

Успокоися Украина-Calm down, Ukraine

Моя бабушка, самая самая-My grandma, best of the best

Мурка- Pronounced "Muurka" a name usually given to a cat

Ну, что-Well?/ so, what?

Д-да- Y-yes?

Author's note: My apologies for not updating for so long, I have been trying to map out how I want the story to unfold, and I have also been experiencing some writer's block, and had some family business to deal with as well, so the story has been going slow. But I have finally found some inspiration and the family issue is solved, so I can confidently say : Full steam ahead.

A letter from the Past

[image]

"So, a letter," Finland said slowly when he saw me at the verge of tears in the doorway. His eyes didn't betray his emotions, but he did scan the paper, thank goodness he didn't recognise who it belonged to. He sighed, and walked over to the balcony, stepped over the threshold and fiddled with his pocket. Since it was dark, I couldn't see what he was doing until I saw the smoke combing out of his mouth. I've noticed many people around me smoked. Funny. Still clutching the letter, I dared not read it until I felt ready, but that didn't mean I didn't hold it. As carefully as possible, I held it close to myself and made my way to Finland, who leaned on the railing to the balcony. It was made of cast iron and was intricately shaped into little trees, and at a closer glance, thick trunks and little leaves told me that they were oaks. I guessed that Mr. UK spent a lot of time on the design and setup of the campus, since he didn't miss even the slightest detail. I expected the smell of smoke to be as disgusting as the belomorkanals that USSR smoked, but they had a sort of smell that I could only describe as cold.

"E-cigarette," Finland said to my silent question, as if anticipating it. "You're one of those people that always has a question, right?"

"Yeah," I nodded. He smirked and looked out at the sky. Silence stretched for almost an eternity, as I wanted to phrase the question, but didn't know how to word it. Many dorm lights were still on from adjacent rooms, and it seemed like there wasn't any sort of curfew that I was "I have multiple nicotine rolls which I insert into this slot," he showed me a little opening tab on the cigarette. "And it doesn't have to be just nicotine. It has certain types of flavours and stuff like that. I personally like menthol, the one I'm using now." He glanced at me once more, took an inhale from the cigarette and laughed, the steam from his mouth coming out like flames from a dragon. "But it's addictive, this stuff. I figured if I should smoke, it

should be Vaping, not inhaling tar, rat poison and polonium-112. But I got hooked on this stuff when I was young, like, twelve, maybe, and I've been vaping ever since."

"I guess." I said absentmindedly. "Smoking is pretty bad for health."

"I never said it was good for my health." He inhaled the steam from the e-cigarette again. "I've got to get help for it. That's what Estonia said. But he's always jumpy about it for no reason."

"Mhmm." I couldn't focus on his words, and thankfully, he didn't continue. He wasn't the sort of person to go on ranting, so he inhaled the steam two more times before he said something again.

"Is that letter....from your father?" Finland asked, and even though he tried to sound carefree, there was a hint of awkwardness and uncertainty in his tone. When I didn't answer, his shoulders rounded and he sharply inhaled through clenched teeth. "Look, I'm not one to invade into private space....or family matters....or gossip.....but if you don't want to tell me, that's your business....I don't need to know." With that he turned the e-cigarette off, and blew the rest of the steam out. The blue fringed button that glowed neon shut off and he threw the empty cartridge into the waste receptacle.

"Err, Finland!" I was surprised by my own voice, and it called to him right before he opened up his phone notifications.

"Yes?"

"Sorry I didn't answer you," I sighed. "I didn't know what to think of it all. The letter is from my father, yes."

"Oh," he said. "Good...I guess. I didn't really need to know, just curious." He smiled at the end and then he settled himself on his bed to read on his phone. I shut the balcony door behind me and walked over to the kitchenette. There were two white stools and a square table in the middle of it. I sat down onto a stool and made myself read the letter that was now crumpled despite my best efforts not to do so. My hands shook with a fine tremor, but the words were like set in stone.

"Hallo Deutschland,

I hope you are old enough to understand my writing so no one but yourself will read it to you. I first want to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for not being there for you ever again, so I will not be able to soothe your hurts, calm your worries or help you when you are in desperation. You will have to do so on your own. But that doesn't mean doing it alone. You don't have to be alone, ever. Just because I was, doesn't mean you need to follow my footsteps and do things that I have done. I'm not the best fatherly figure for you to look up to, and I hope that with whomever your welfare was entrusted is a better example than me, and that you aren't being judged or treated badly because of me and what I did. I was shaped by my environment, and I tried so desperately to make sure that you didn't have to jump through flames to just live. I predict that the world will change vastly and that militia and warfare won't dominate as much as they did before. That is good. I don't want you to live in a war zone either.

I want you to live in a world of light, not haunted by my shadow and too scared to approach people because you are afraid that they will take you for me. No. I don't want you think of me, both in reminisce or hatred. Don't even try to unravel what I was thinking when I started the war, or when I condemned people to death, or when I so vainly tried to kill myself. I want you to walk away from those who try to stir conversation onto me, and stay away from thinking about what I did. It isn't your fault, so no need to analyse and philosophically discuss it. Just live your life, think about yourself and your future. Try to see the brightness of things, and don't let people sway your opinion with faulty propaganda. You are your own person. You live your way.

I hope you aren't being forced to choose something you don't want to do, and you are truly happy in your foster home. I know the memories of me are already too deep to erase, and this letter has brought up more of them, but try to incorporate yourself in with them. Maybe it will make you feel better and wanted. If you haven't thought of that, that's fine too. One more fatherly tip for you. You will be better off with your mind on yourself and foster family and friends than reminiscing and getting depressed and apathetic over

me. By this time, my body is either burned, rotted or part of the earth. But my spirit is with you, by your side, and watching you from above. Your future is bright and colourful, I believe in you. I love you, Deutschland. You are not like me. You are different.

Your dearest father,

Drittes Reich."

"Germany," someone whispered from behind me. For a wild moment, I thought it was my father's spirit and I yelped as the stool crashed to the ground.

"Sorry! Sorry, Germany." It was Finland, and my breath became even and controlled the longer I was sure it was him. "You were crying that's all. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yes," I hiccuped. I didn't realise that I was crying until I felt my hot cheeks wet with salty tears. I hadn't cried since I was first punished by USSR. Since then I haven't shed a single tear. "I'm fine."

"Alright." He said nervously. "If you say so. I'm going to bed, so the lights will be out soon. I'll leave a nightlight on for you."

"Okay." I whispered.

"Hyvää yötä, Saksaa."

"Um, you too."

"Oh, sorry." He smiled apologetically. "Good night."

"Guten Nacht," I nodded and put the stool back onto its four legs again. I reread the letter several times over, each time I felt better, and when the clock struck 23:00, I thought I felt a weight on my shoulder, and an inaudible whisper said something. My logical conscious was screaming that it was the wind from the half opened window and the weight on my shoulder was just a bone clicking in place from inactivity. But my quiet and faithful subconscious told me otherwise, and that it was truly my father next to me. Either I was going crazy, or I was tired, but I believed my subconscious over conscious that night. I sighed again, and shut the lights off in the

clean and tidy kitchenette to find myself in total darkness, except for the faint red light from the main room. I made my way to the water closet, that thankfully had a sign showing me where it was in the half light. I hissed slightly when I closed the door and turned on the light, since I was not prepared for the bright LED white lights that materialised around the room. Two sinks faced a wide mirror and the one next to the door had a navy blue toiletries case with Finland's flag intricately stitched on the side. On my side, lay a grey fabric case with my name written on a paper taped to the top. Inside were some toiletries and a handwritten note with very loopy writing from Estonia, Finland's friend. It was a very warm and sympathetic note, and it read that the case belonged to him, and he bought the supplies at a store near the campus. I had the feeling that Estonia was a warmhearted and loyal person who was willing to do anything for what he felt was right. I reminded myself to thank him for what he did, quickly brushed my teeth, washed the salty tears off my face with lukewarm water and turned the light off in the WC before I realised that my face was still wet and that I left my glasses on the sinktop. I didn't bother to retrieve my glasses and wiped my face dry on my shirt sleeve. Shutting off the nightlight in the main room, I changed into nightclothes and folded my shirt and slacks into the closet by the beds. I climbed up to the top bunk and fell asleep before my head even touched the pillow. Before I knew it, I could hear the cheerful chirping of birds in a bright light.

Hallo- Hello

Drittes Reich- Third Reich (Nazi Germany)

Hyvää yötä- Good night

Saksaa-Germany

Guten Nacht- Good night

City

[image]

"Russia," Ukraine whined. "Your arm is touching my side!"

"Oh I'm sorry," I said crossly. "You're whole left side is touching me."

"Its not my fault that you're so big." He whined. "You take up all of my space."

"Well, I can't change that. Deal with it." I saw my father smirk from the rear-view mirror. We were in my father's «Lada» on the Шоссе to the city for three things: to visit a relative of ours, to "buy things" and my departure. I don't know which of my relatives lived in the city, but father was probably out of cigarettes and decided to kill three birds with one stone and get cigarettes, see me off early, and go visit one of his children, all the while emptying their refrigerator of food.

"I have a lot of space, Украина," Kazakhstan chipped from the far right. "You can move closer to me."

"Um, thanks Казахстан," Ukraine looked at his younger brother awkwardly. "But I'm okay now." I laughed quietly. Kazakhstan was very kind, and would make sure everyone was comfortable before he was. Us brothers were squished together in the right car with Ukraine in the middle and me on the left. Not a good combination, since we would always fight. It didn't matter how old we got, or how we wanted to set Kazakhstan an example, we had to prove who was right over the other. Belarus, on the other hand, sat in the front, away from the ruckus and tightness of the back. She always got preferential treatment, even if my father tried to make it subtle, we still saw throughout the facade. But she was a girl after all, and we were all boys. It made sense.

"Were almost there, boys," father said calmly. "So don't fight

anymore, alright?"

"Papa, I don't like this song." Belarus whispered. "Can we change it?"

"No," father smiled in Belarus' direction. "I like this one."

"It's weird." father laughed when Belarus shuddered.

"I'm serious, Papa!" She said indignantly and crossed her arms.

"Oh Belarus," father laughed. "It's not a weird song. It's just not what I usually listen to."

"Okay."

"We're almost there anyway," he said, haphazardly swerving to the left, meaning that he almost missed the correct exit, and the car careened over on one set of wheels very dangerously. Even though we all knew father was a very experienced driver, he was reckless on the road, and it seemed we could crash into everything. Thankfully, none of us experienced that. Father's Lada was made for those kinds of dangerous careens and turns. It was small and compact, with a steel fender and chipped red paint on the sides. Not a pretty sight, but it was built to last and to withstand neglect and abuse from the driver. Not that he did so, but the car had seen better days. He did make the car from scratch by himself, using the parts from his old car that was more fanciful than practical for my father's use.

"Are we there yet?" Ukraine whined. "Russia and Kazakhstan are rubbing against my sides."

"Yes, Ukraine," father sighed. "In a couple of minutes."

"If we're lucky," I loudly whispered to Kazakhstan, who giggled in turn. Ukraine looked at me with his eyes narrowed.

"Not funny, Russia," he growled. "Not funny at all."

"Lighten up." I said to him. "We are almost there."

The shocce morphed into a large highway, which had six lanes in both directions, hundreds of freeways and even more bridges and exits, all of which were clogged with cars. My father cursed softly under his breath and when our car reached standstill, he let out a small laugh and took out yet another cigarette. Belarus looked at him with a very mother-like glare.

"Papa!" She said. "You told me-,"

"Belarus, what I told you was a lie," father laughed, lighting the cigarette and holding it out of the car window. "Don't make that face, it makes you look like your mother too much."

"But you said you wouldn't smoke anymore."

"Bela, the man who also asked me to do that died, so I can do whatever I want. Free reign, you know."

"Still." Belarus huffed and tried to nab the cigarette from father's mouth when he put it in, but he was quicker, and flicked the stub out the window before she could reach it.

"Nice try." He smiled at her, and the car finally was able to move, since the traffic cleared and we set off towards the main city exit.

"Why do people even like these cities?" Father growled to himself as an obnoxious orange car swerved in front of us. I silently agreed with him. The city was full of people, smoke and conversation, and I could only deal with one of those problems, not all three. People liked to talk to me and I would politely say something back, but to the person's dissatisfaction I would stay silent, and wouldn't say anything leaving that person to go seething in anger from me. I can't talk to people who make small talk about the weather, their possessions or their crude and often weird hobbies and collections. I don't want to talk about my dysfunctional family or my own hobbies, which people find boring, too rough, or just risky. People just need a channel to talk to, and all I do is just one and say, "yeah," but when my turn to speak comes, I come off as uninteresting, sullen, hostile and plain.

"Why does he have to be in the city?" Father muttered again.

"Couldn't he cuddle up with his weird friend somewhere else?"

We passed the long and busy main streets, full of people, cars, carts, shops, food, smoke, smells, glares, more people, conversations, opinions, stereotypes, assumptions and judgement. It seemed that I had cowered in my seat, since when I turned to face Ukraine, his eyes betrayed his feelings of confusion, disgust and all underneath was worry.

"Are you....Okay?" He asked. His voice gave a warbling tone, both wary and trying to be confident. He couldn't mask his worry for long and hugged my arm, pressing the side of his face to my shoulder. "You still smell bad though."

"I'm fine." I said. "Just anxious." The car finally stopped at a busy street and father opened the door and came out.

"Let's go," he said, taking a small ornamental paper bag out of the trunk. "I'm parking in the back. Go up to the door. Call him in, say it's us. He'll open the door, don't use the elevator, use stairs."

"Okay." I got out and took the bag. A cheap little gift stuck out of the tissue wrapping, and before I knew it, me, Ukraine and Belarus were standing outside on the busy and skyscraper ridden street, with the red Lada nowhere in sight. Ukraine took the lead and walked down to the alley way where there were back doors of all kinds of restaurants and bars, but there was also a landing with a large steel door and a number pad next to it. A wall shielded the door from the view of the alley, but it was still covered in old ads, pleadings and love messages.

"4472," Ukraine muttered, punching in the numbers on the keypad. It bussed to life, and elicited a strange ringing sound, until we heard a noise like when someone picks up a phone.

"Hello?" Went a quiet and soft voice.

"Hey, it's us!" Belarus shouted before Ukraine could say a word. "Belarus, Ukraine and Russia!"

"Oh, hi guys!" The voice became chippy and light. "I'll open the

door, come in." He put the phone down and the door unlocked, letting us into the cramped and dark landing of the apartment building. The little mailboxes were lined up on one side of the wall, most of them were rusted and bent, only few were intact and free of rust. There were no apartments on the first floor, which only had restaurants on them, but the small staircase showed that there were many more on top. There weren't any swear words written on the walls, but it smelled like rats, mold and crayons. The cold cement steps were painted grey, with the floor number written on the wall in front.

"This way," Ukraine whispered, trying not to elicit an echo in the stone surrounding. "Come on." Me and Belarus dutifully followed, out footsteps echoing noisily across the hallway.

"Why doesn't he let us use an elevator?" Belarus huffed, as we reached the fifth landing.

"He thinks we'll get stuck." Ukraine said. "I actually agree."

"Well, these elevators aren't exactly like the one he used," I countered. "But they are old, cramped and rickety." I added, seeing that Ukraine was about to say something back. One thing that father and Ukraine had in common were their fears. Most of the fears father had, that were around objects, like elevators, Ukraine shared.

"We're here," I heard Belarus say. "4472."

"Yay." Ukraine sighed, almost collapsing on the steps. "Knock on the door."

"Erm," Belarus said nervously. "The gate is locked."

"Ingenious." I looked into the locked gate of the two flats that shared the floor. On the adjacent side was the heavy oak door with the white numbers emblazoned onto the surface, 4472.

"Russia," Ukraine said. "Take your hand and slide it into the lock hatch, you might get it."

"My arm is too big."

"Well ours are too short." Ukraine growled with frustration. "Come on."

"Fine. But if I lose my arm, you're the one to tell father what happened."

"Deal."

"Gosh," I huffed. "So quick on striking a deal." In fact, I was able to reach the hatch and pull the mechanism through, without knowing how it worked and just feeling blindly. I did successfully undo the lock, with a couple of scrapes and one bruise, but at least I've reached the goal. The Victorian style red gate swung open and we assembled ourselves at the door, as Belarus stepped on her tiptoes to use the white knocker. She then stepped back swiftly, and after a few moments, we heard a scratching and a door click. The door opened to reveal our older sibling. He was dressed in the way he always was. A light blue wool vest over a white dress shirt, navy blue slacks and the only thing that was different about his appearance were the brown and fluffy socks that he was wearing. But his facial expression, fidgety hands, sparkling eyes and the slight dimples on his cheeks when he smiled were all the same. I couldn't believe that he survived so long in the city with his attitude and carefree philosophy. His eyes were the darkest shade of azure, almost purple, but not that deep, and they shone with a quiet excitement. It was Estonia. The mediator, healer and pillar of balance. You couldn't really be mad at him for long.

"Hi," he spoke with a quiet soft voice which immediately could calm every nerve. "Ooh, sorry about the gate. If forgot that you guys were coming."

"That's okay." Ukraine said, but if Estonia saw how he was reacting to the gate being locked, he would have a different response.

"Come in," he gestured inside and it was then that I realised that the landing was freezing, since the inside of the flat was warm and comfortable.

"Ah, should I leave the door unlocked?" Estonia asked. "Father has the key to the main door, and it wouldn't look good if I locked it.

Yeah, I'll do that. Also, shoes can go there." He pointed to a mat where there was only one pair of dusty black boots and three pairs of crisp loafers in tan, black and white. While I carefully unlaced my shoes and placed them on the mat, Belarus bounced up to Estonia and gave him the strings to the gift bag.

"Oh, thank you," he said, hugging Belarus. "Oh, I like these." His voice did not show his emotion to the gift. It wasn't a good one, really. A cheap little figurine of a matryoshka doll, but instead of being wooden with a faded red, green and yellow palette that is usually father's to-go gift for meetings, negotiations or parties of sorts, the doll that was in the bag was white and blue, and it looked like it was made of spun glass, since it was so light and fragile, as well as being translucent. After I had looked at it more closely, I saw the value of the figurine rise before my eyes. "It goes very nicely with my wall scheme." Estonia added.

"Father showed it to me before," Belarus boasted. "He asked me if I think you'd like it."

"You were right then." Estonia carefully placed the doll on the mantlepiece above the fireplace that elicited no heat, but the flames danced merrily in a symmetrical fashion, and it took me a minute to figure out that the fire was electric, and that in the city, these luxuries were very common. Estonia was a quiet and calm person, and his personality had shaped his apartment aesthetic. The walls were all a muted form of light blue, white or light grey and the windows were unusually large for this type of flat, and they had the same heavy dark blue curtains that I had, but they were drawn back to reveal the busy city down below, the scurrying of the people, the carts, the automobiles, the trolleybuses, trams, taxis, the energised air of purpose, the feeling of somewhere to be was all over the city. His relatively empty room held a white couch with natural wood legs. It had an intricately pattern of light blue and white alternating triangles in various forms and sizes and looked like it was made of wool. The other blanket was folded on top of the woollen one and was a soft navy and grey mix of faux sherpa. Two unique pillows were next to each other on the other side of the couch, one with Estonia's tricolour and 'Estlane' stitched neatly in gold on the middle stripe. The other was a flag, and I remember who had it, but I

couldn't pin name to face. The flag was white with a blue horizontal cross and 'Suomi' was stitched in the same script. I vaguely remembered the face of this person, and maybe once or twice have I seen him with Estonia.

"Are you guys hungry?" Estonia asked, as he shut off the electric fire and fussed over the pillows on the couch.

"Yes." Ukraine nodded.

"Come," Estonia headed to the left down a small hallway and into a room with the navy blue curtains drawn. He hastily opened them to let the light flood into the kitchen. It was not as small as I expected a regular apartment kitchen to be. A marble topped bar style table was in the middle of the room and the polished wood cabinets and chairs were a light sandalwood and birch mix, and a porcelain vase with delicate blue roses stood on the windowsill along with the only red thing in the kitchen: our father's flag. It was not in full sight, unless you searched for it, it was relatively hidden by the roses. Estonia paid no attention to my staring, but he purposefully strode to the cupboard and opened it to reveal a small black refrigerator and looked inside for a long moment.

"I have some räim," Estonia said, taking out a a fish in a plate covered in a plastic film. "It's herring."

"Is it...." Belarus stopped her sentence midway. "I'm not a fish person."

"Sure," Estonia shrugged his shoulders and rummaged through the fridge once more. "Verivorst, that's meat, also Pirukas, both küpsetatud and plaadipirukad and buckwheat." Estonia looked at Belarus and it looked like she was deciding between what was the better of two worsts.

"Pirukas, I guess." She said.

"küpsetatud or plaadipirukad?" He pronounced the words with such speed and fluidity that it made Belarus' expression turn from quizzical to confused.

"Basically small ones or large ones." Estonia laughed. "I don't like fried food much, so they're both baked. But my plaadipirukad are filled with cabbage and meat, and the küpsetatud are with carrots and mushrooms. I dislike ham in general."

"Er, I guess the pladipirkudad thing."

"Okay, great. And you guys?" He turned to me and Ukraine expectantly.

"I'll take the same." Ukraine sat down on the chair closest to the door and opened his phone to scroll down an article.

"Venemaa?"

"Me?" I asked uncertain.

"Yes, sorry."

"I'll have that Räim fish."

"Good choice." He nodded. "I'll take that too. Hot, cold? Preferences?"

"No."

"Cold it is then." He smiled apologetically. "I'm a bit lazy today." He heated the pirukas for Belarus and Ukraine and after ten or so minutes of awkward silence interrupted by Belarus' drumming on the countertop, Estonia settled the plates onto the table. "Here."

"Thanks," we replied in unison.

"Sure," he smiled and sat down opposite to us. After some minutes of silence and the clattering of the silverware on the plates Estonia raised his head to face me.

"Russia, how old are you again?"

"Eighteen." When I raised my eyes, his own were already locked into mine.

"So...." He waited for me to finish his sentence. I knew what his question was but I didn't answer it. "What did father decide for you?"

"He didn't decide for me." I answered stubbornly. It was half the truth, and our father was very authoritative and liked to exercise his power. I was his 'prime example'. He wanted his children to be successful, but sometimes to be successful means sacrifice. Too much in too little time made some of his children very angry with him, so some just cut ties, others ran away to cities and such. I never heard Estonia complain about father much, he just kept his thoughts to himself. A wise choice and it left him with many friends and little stress and a manageable and even amicable relationship with father.

"Oh, come on," Estonia raised his eyebrows, but the smile still on his face. "He is trying to make you a mathematician, isn't he? Or maybe a, what is it called....Oh, a weapons developer."

"No. I chose what I want myself."

"Really." He nodded. "How liberal." I heard the sarcasm in his voice, and even though I've heard it before, it was never directed at me from him.

"He even approved of my choice," I kept on.

"Well, it's probably something in the Mechanics field, right?"

"Yes."

"Knew it." He shook his head. "I'm not saying that's bad, Venemaa, I'm just going off my experience. Father tried to make me into an engineer too. I just don't have the build for that." He was right on that point. Estonia had a thin and medium height build, with delicate spindly fingers and wide eyes. That was really, the exact opposite of what you needed to be to work at father's factory. You had to be either big and tall, or short and stocky, with powerful hands and resistant fingers. Estonia was made for fast small motorics and a desk job. He was a fluffy and sometimes slow on the uptake, and that's what got father's latest employee killed last

month.

"I wanted to do something else, so I decided not to get under the family's feet and I left, you know." He continued. "Life in the city is good for me, it's convenient, it's not hard, I don't have to drive to the stores for three and a half hours, and it's also very exciting and enjoyable, being around people and such. My friends live close by and I'm right next to the train station to the Uni. It's great here."

"Are you advertising the city?" Ukraine asked.

"A little." Estonia laughed warmly. "But that's my preference. What about school? Did you get to a good university?" His slouched posture became rigid and neck cranked forward towards me. He was suddenly serious and attentive. "It's your degree that gets you places."

"Yes, I did get into a University."

"That's already good." He looked at my harassed expression and added. "I'm not sarcastic."

"Great."

"Please go on."

"Fine. Just don't stare at me for too long when I say it."

"Sure."

"The International Partnership University that U.K. runs."

"IUUP?"

"Yeah." I watched as Estonia's eyes became wider by the second.

"HOW?" Estonia was in shock that his voice raised three octaves. I almost jumped out of my seat out of surprise and Belarus choked on her pirukas and Ukraine hit her on the back till she stopped.

"Sorry." Belarus swallowed the pirukas and apologized. "Thanks Ukraine."

"Sure."

"How did you...." Estonia had his hands on his head, both in shocks and joy. "No, I'm happy for you, but.....don't get the wrong idea.....but.....it's.....just wow."

"You made Estonia lose his voice." Ukraine pointed out, and Estonia was still moving his mouth, but no sound came out. After about five more minutes, he turned to face us again and composed himself.

"Sorry for that," he managed. "I was just shocked, that's all. It takes a lot to prepare for that university's admission standards. It's great that you got in, I am really happy for you."

"Where do you go, Estonia?" Belarus asked. He reached over and patted my shoulder and laughed, but it sounded more like forced air than a laugh.

"The same place." With that, he whisked all of the empty plates away and started to wash them.

"Wait, you go there too?" Belarus asked again, now picking at the wood panels instead of her plate.

"Yeah, that's why I left the 'nest' so early." He said as he washed the plates off and carefully set them on a clean towel to dry. "I thought myself as better, but, now I realise that I am still the same down-to-earth person as I used to be. I thought that mingling in with the elite would show me how to be like them, but it just showed me that I am not a simple person anymore, nor am I a rich tycoon either."

"I don't think I'll be able to leave the Nest." I admitted. The Nest was sort of a codeword for our home in the forest, the one our father built, and since we all called it our childhood home, it's like a nest that birds build.

"Until you've tasted freedom." He said good naturedly. A loud knock resonated from the door and he almost jumped from surprise. "That must be father. Wait." He scurried to the door to open it. A moment later, Kazakhstan came into the kitchen and then father and

Estonia.

"Hi." Kazakhstan jumped onto the chair that was almost twice as tall as him as if it was no problem. He sat on it, content with himself, and reached over to put his hand in the middle of Ukraine's phone to get his attention. "We went to get stuff." It was in Kazakhstan's nature to keep secrets where it was needed. You had to rely on Kazakhstan's mood or his feeling of value of the secret for him to be able to keep it.

"What do you buy?" Ukraine asked, angry that Kazakhstan interrupted his texting.

"A secret!" Kazakhstan giggled and with the same unnatural agility and speed, he jumped into my arms for me to hug. I petted him on the head and he whispered to me. "We were getting books and papa's cigarettes. The books are for you!"

"Thanks." I whispered to him. He sat content on my lap and looked up at father and Estonia, who were already in a conversation.

"The school's great," Estonia seemed to be reassuring him. "It's not like people will pick on him because of....you know."

"That's not the problem." Father sat down on a chair and faced Estonia. Estonia sighed and walked over to the window to open it.

"Don't be so pessimistic." He said facing the window and squinting outside. "That's just...who is that?" It seemed he was muttering to himself.

"Who?" Kazakhstan asked.

"Don't be nosy, Kazakhstan." Father told him. "It isn't your business."

"There's just someone outside who always is here at the same time, same place, doing nothing." Estonia explained.

"Probably doing drugs," Father said dismissively. "What else?"

"I don't know." Estonia shrugged and closed the window again. He messed with the flowers absentmindedly, but I saw that he hid

father's flag between the blue roses. "So, when are you going?"

"Me?" I asked.

"Who else?"

"Today." Father cut in. "That's why we came to this place." He spat the word 'place' out like a rotten pear full of worms. "I was hoping you would take him with you."

"Sure!" Estonia regained his bouncy attitude. "That would be great."

"Good." Father nodded. "When are you going?"

"Um, well, in the evening. I'm meeting Finland and we decided to leave together."

"Finland." Father said slowly. "Him again."

"Sorry, he's nice."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"Everything is." Estonia tried to frown, but a smile crept in the corners of his mouth. He hugged father and kept his arms circled on his neck.

"What am I going to do with you?" Father smiled at Estonia. "I can't be mad at you for very long."

"Nope." Estonia freed him from the hug and stood to lean on the doorway. The sun outsideseeped through the window and illuminated the kitchen and then as fast as it came in, it disappeared.

"Okay." Father stood up and the kitchen suddenly seemed small again. "Russia, your things are here. So we are going to go now." Estonia nodded and left the vicinity.

"Mhmm." There was no use to try to stop father from making judgements. He signalled for Belarus and Ukraine to come and Kazakhstan hugged me very tightly on the neck.

"I love you." Kazakhstan whispered to me.

"I'm not dying." I patted him on the head. "I'll come back. Eventually."

"Okay." Kazakhstan slid down from the chair, but still held my hand. Belarus kissed my cheek and I did the same for her, and Ukraine gave me a swift hug and retreated behind father. Father looked down at me and smiled.

"You'll do fine." His words were usually reassuring, but the quickness of the parting made the words seem icy. "I've talked to U.K., so he'll give you information. And you'll be able to come back during New Years break. I'm proud of you Russia. You have secured yourself a great future." I wrapped my arms around him and for a whole half a minute we stood there, not moving. I was imagining a heart breaking departure, but now, I felt much better. I thought I might never let go of the hem of father's overcoat, but when he let go of me, I didn't have the urge to latch back on again. Was this 'freedom'? Was this what the Western Radio kept droning on about? I wasn't sure. Father looked at me one more time, took Kazakhstan in one arm and Belarus by the other.

"Have a good term."

"Bye Russia!"

"Bye bye!"

"Bye." Ukraine said to me and they left the apartment.

"Did they leave?" Estonia suddenly reappeared. "I didn't want to disturb you departure." I just nodded. I guess I looked stricken, because Estonia touched me lightly on the shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yes."

"Okay, just checking. You look sort of pale."

"No. I'm fine. Just thinking."

"Are you excited?"

"Er, I guess. You can't get excited about school, really." I sensed a smile coming on my face.

"I can." He said. "Maybe I'm weird. It is the best school out there." He looked at his phone. "Okay, Finland is coming soon, and then we'll be leaving."

"Alright."

"Great." He left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. -You were always a thinker- father's voice kept clouding my thoughts and I wondered how people would see me, since I've never actually met anyone by myself to create my own impression of myself. This was going to be interesting.

Шоссе- a highway of sorts in Russia. Usually one or two lane.

Казахстан-Kazakhstan

Украина- Ukraine

Venemaa-Russia (in Estonian)

Journey

[image]

"So." Estonia was in a deep virtual conversation with his friend in his phone. "Russia, I want you to, please, be ready to leave, and I also want to ask you a question."

"I'm all ears." The fact that we didn't have the physical representation of an ear vexed me, because that expression was used very often by U.K. during debates.

"Do you have..." Estonia was only partially talking to me. "Oh, do you have....book preferences?"

"Well," I thought about the question for a moment. The book I usually read were either manuals or father's books, but all others were school requirement reading. I wouldn't read anything that people shoved in my face, and I was extremely picky with book choice. "Yes. I do."

"What kind?" He looked up at me for a split second. "I mean, genre."

"Of book?" I was starting to get annoyed with his cut off sentences.

"Yes. Don't make that face. You look like a carbon copy of father when you do that."

"If it's not a manual, then historical, maybe realistic fiction, maybe classical drama..." I trailed off. There were many unknowns in the equation. I really preferred to browse in a bookstore rather than have someone look for a book for me. "Why are you asking?"

"Russia, just asking. Finland wants to get you a gift. His type of gift is a book."

"You could have told me then." I replied. "Historical or something

linked to it."

"Great." He resumed to type on the small screen of his phone. "You can do whatever. I don't mind." I didn't feel like replying and it seemed that his attention was already swallowed up by the phone. I quietly crept through the apartment to not disturb the quiet and peace. He had a four room flat, which was very surprising, since I had never heard of so many rooms in an apartment unless it was a very rich man or woman. Estonia loved the colour blue, in all different hues and shades, and the last room that I went in was dark, because of the curtains that were drawn. The heavy navy blue curtains blocked out all of the light, and only when I opened them did I see what was around me. The room was designed in a very unique way, with one whole array of books on one side of the room, and a spot in the middle, where a bed occupied the space. On the other side there was a large painting of a serene snowy landscape with bare birch trees. A work desk made of pale wood and may strange cubic drawers stood below it. On the desk was a mess of papers, a photo of Estonia, him and father, the family, and another one of him with Finland. There was also a silver laptop with a sticker of Estonia's flag on where the logo should have been. Only then did I come to realise that maybe it was Estonia's own design of computer, since father mentioned that Estonia was a programmer and he was studying in the Information technology field. I guessed that this room was his bedroom, but the room was cold and unwelcome in a sense, so it seemed like he hadn't slept here in a while.

"Russia!" I heard Estonia's voice cut in. He was not a master at yelling. It sounded as if he was trying to raise his voice above regular

"Yes?" I yelled back.

"Come here. I need to ask something. Again."

"Coming." I quickly rushed out of the room, shutting the light out with the curtains. Estonia was talking on the phone with who I assumed was Finland.

"Hey," he waved me over, and handed me the phone.

"Hello." Finland's voice sounded through the speaker. His voice was lower than I expected and remembered. His physique and face did not match his voice, but maybe it was just the speaker, as well as his environment was muffled and loud. "I just wanted to say hello. And congratulations on your, well, acceptance."

"Thank you." I said curtly.

"Sure. It's nice to know someone in the school, you know. But me and Estonia are going to our last year, so we might not see each other very much. But we'll talk when I get there. The metro is noisy. I can barely hear myself."

"Yes." I gave Estonia back his phone and he quickly said goodbye.

"He's going with us." Estonia said. "It'll take him a while to get here. So probably in about an hour or two. I'm going to nap, even though that sounds stupid, and like an old person, I need to do something. I woke up at three today." I nodded and he left to the main room. What Estonia actually did was leave me with my thoughts. I did not like to have free thinking. I always manage to have my thoughts from a loop, going from expectations, to worry about academics, to worry about the family and back again. What I didn't worry about but I often thought of the notion was friendship. It didn't even cross my mind to worry about it. I never really had those kinds of true friends. I was either with my family, or at school with a gaggle of boys who had nothing to do and just wanted to fool around to kill time. In my school, kindness and friendship was a big deal, and we even had a class on social emotional learning. Nothing could have been more dull and uninteresting than that. I was willing to take double English over this Social-Emotional Class. The teacher was artificially chirpy every day, no matter the day, and we had her class first thing in the morning. She made these extravagant speeches about how we should be friends with everyone as if our lives depended on it. At least I wasn't her 'worst' student, and she didn't notice her often, but that class was still insufferable. We had to sing these awful songs, hold hands with people you normally wouldn't even come close to, and our homework was to fill out sheets of paper with useless information on kindness, compassion, generosity, blah, blah, blah. It was insulting to us high schoolers, who were taking classes like calculus and foreign language five, and

then we had to stoop down to a kindergarten class in our last year. The worst part was it was compulsory and there was no way to avoid it. At first I thought I would make some friends there, but it just showed me how stupid the education system in my area was. I guess my only real 'friend' was a girl named Cyprus. In my opinion, she was too rich to be in our school, and her parents should have taken her to a private school. I met her in my Social Emotional learning class, and she was the first one to get in trouble for laughing about the content of the class. She was sent to the headmaster's office and I was relieved that I was not the only one who hated the class. Cyprus was an interesting and mischievous girl. Her parents were very wealthy and she could afford to do anything she wanted. Her parents were Greece and Turkey. Greece was a mathematician who was very influential in her sphere of geometry and algebraic systems, while Turkey was a very strong trader and businessman. Even though her parents had frequent clashes over ideas, expectations, domestics, religion and the colour of their furniture. Cyprus waved dismissively at her parents' squabbles and she always talked about the future. She liked to dance, create mosaics and she kept a intensely shy sheep. She was a person of aesthetic, and she'd always laugh when I tried to dance with her. Father urged me to get close to her, and was probably scheming for me to marry her as well, which would make me rich, strengthen the ties between our family and Turkey, and would be better for all of us. Too bad that there were two problems. Firstly, Turkey was a man who was very smart and cunning. He showed distaste for me at first when Cyprus invited me to her lavish home. Turkey regarded me with his dark and lidded eyes his face partially hooded by the darkness of the room and the smoke from his large pipe. He shook his head every time he saw me with his daughter and he had subtle ways of threatening people. Secondly, Cyprus wasn't my match. No matter how much my father wanted me to marry her, no matter how much richer I would be if I turned eighteen and suddenly married and wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again, it wasn't appealing to me. Cyprus was a good friend, not a lover. She was an exuberant soul with much potential in the arts, but I was a down to earth person with two left feet in dancing on the ground. I couldn't write poetry, it sounded like all I could write about were crows, winter and broken ice, and I didn't paint or sculpt. I could play the piano, somewhat, and the violin,

above average, but that never got me anywhere. What did was my strong aptitude in physics and that was my leverage.

"Hello." A voice sounded through my thoughts and I felt an icy hand on my shoulder. I yelped and jumped back in surprise. The man standing in front of me was huge, just a little taller than father and he radiated cold. His face looked like it never betrayed emotion, but he smiled at me nevertheless. "You're nervous." He noted.

"You surprised me." I said defensively. He was certainly shocking. He looked laidback and even borderline placid. He had a style most adults wouldn't approve of, with black jeans and a grey tee shirt, with a light grey thin jacket, as well as a fluffy white and blue hat on his head. A black messenger bag was slung over his right shoulder in a very carefree way, and once I got over the initial wave of cold from him, I got the feeling he was a quiet and reserved person who didn't talk much. Instead of replying to me, he merely shrugged.

"My guess is that you're Russia, right?" He extended his hand and I shook it. It was not as cold as his aura, but his hand was turning to ice the longer I held it. His hand was probably warmed from outside factors.

"Yes." I said.

"Nice to meet you." He chuckled. "I know your dad."

"That's....neat."

"More like messy. Showed me what kind of a diplomat I am." He laughed. His laugh was dry and sounded brittle. "Anyway, I am Estonia's friend. I got you a book. Two books, actually."

"Thank you....?" My answer sounded more like a question. He reached into his bag and took out a paperback and hardbound book. The paperback looked very new, with a cellophane covering and it looked like it was in good condition. The hardbound book looked heavy, beaten and old. The letters on the spine were a faded gold on navy blue leather.

"Here." He gave me the books. "The softcover is a historical fiction. I've read it before, it's a classic. The hardcover is my own book, left in my family library. It's about Nordic history and everything. I personally think it's a bit jargon heavy and very intensive, but you might like it."

"Thank you." I managed. The hardbound was made of heavyweight paper and had a handsome cover and golden clasps. The cover inside had many little sticky notes and there was messy loopy script in the margin. It was certainly one of a kind.

"I didn't need it anymore. It has been passed from my ancestors down the line, each making their own notes in the margins, criticizing each other's ideas or choices. I have my own there too." He showed me the small and straight lettering of his handwriting. His words had many spaces between them and the letters were packed together like pines. "It's written in Finnish though. So it might not matter to you."

"I know some." I admitted. "Not much, but enough." He shrugged again and went back to leaning on the doorway. Even his eyes were whorls of ice as if he was entirely made of solid water.

"Hi Finland!" Estonia appeared out of the doorway. The height difference between them was more than noticeable. He hugged Finland by the waist. "How are you?"

"Fine." Finland hugged him back. "Like always."

"Like always." Estonia echoed. He softly giggled and looked back up at Finland. "Are we going?"

"That is the plan." Finland said curtly. "We go now. Oh, Estonia, here." He handed Estonia a cardboard box which was casually set on the ground. I didn't notice it was his until he bent down to pick it up off the floor. "Denmark wanted to get you something. Then so did Sweden. Before I knew it, the box weighed more than standard shipping price. I just decided to give it to you."

"Aw, thanks." Estonia gingerly took the box and set it in the counter. "I love Denmark's confections. They're so pretty and

delicate." He took out a shimmering sugar spun figure of a butterfly. The handiwork was amazing with the wings made of what seemed was crystal all different colours and designs.

"She made the second one for you." Finland commented as Estonia took out a thin piece of the sugar confection, a statue with Estonia's flag waving in the wind.

"I will definitely have a hard time eating these." Estonia laughed, putting then into a small glass case. "Very sad. I love sugar."

"Denmark has a million of those." Finland smiled. "Not that she'll be able to sell all of them, so I can give you more."

"They look so sweet." Estonia cooed. "As in pretty."

"I got that." Finland scrolled down his phone. He frowned at his phone and then laughed. "Oh, yeah...my mistake." He went back into the hall and then came into the kitchen again with a small cardboard box. He shoved it into my hands with some force. "This is from my sister. I told her that I'd be travelling with one of USSR'S kids."

"Er, thanks, again." I placed the box on the table, but I didn't open it. It was common courtesy not to look into gifts before the giver. "Tell her that I said thank you to her."

"Sure." Finland said and addressed Estonia. "We'd better go. I want to know who my roommate this year is."

"Won't it be, what's his name...I forgot."

"No. U.K. asked me to volunteer to be a roommate to a first year."

"Him?" Estonia pointed at me.

"I don't know. Maybe." Finland shrugged. It was obvious that he couldn't care less if he was roommates with anyone. It seemed like he was just that kind of person: placid, like a frozen lake on a still winter morning. He was a nice person, but poor company in conversation and he was either shallow or he was good at hiding his personality.

"Okay. Are you still in the same college though?"

"Yes." The smile flickered on his face. "Can we go Estonia? I don't want to wait for the train."

"Okay, okay." Estonia went back into the hallway. I dutifully followed them. My own suitcase and bag were next to a closet in the hall.

"Estonia, my car won't fit that thing."

"Yes it will. I believe in your car."

"My car doesn't believe in itself to hold that thing." The 'thing' was a large case that took on a rectangular form. It looked like an instrument, but Estonia didn't look like a musical person.

"Come on Finland. It's not far."

"Fine, fine." He waved his hand. "Just, come on."

"You like my Kannel. You told me so."

"Why does it have such a big case?"

"I have more stuff in it."

"Like what?" The two kept talking while we went down the stairs and out into the street. The smell of roasted food mixed with asphalt and smoke was foreign to me and I probably had a very displeased expression on my face, because Estonia asked me what was wrong.

"Nothing." I fixed my face. "It's just the smell." He nodded understandably and stopped at a black sedan. It was a fairly new Saab 99, without a single scratch, save for a few on the right back of the trunk. Finland opened it and pushed Estonia's Kannel case into the back. He took my suitcase and rucksack and his own stuff and closed the trunk.

"I suggest you take that box with you." Finland warned me. "It's fragile." I sat down in the back of the car, and listened to Estonia's

chatter on his project. To be honest, I didn't listen to the words, but let the noise wash over me until Finland turned on his music and it was the type of genre I wouldn't attribute to his quiet demeanour. At least he kept it on low volume.

It took a while to get to the station, with traffic lights on each block and streams of people bustling about. I was almost asleep when the rear door opened and Finland's voice sounded through my hazy thoughts.

"Good morning." He laughed.

"Hi." I grumbled. We unpacked the car, Finland didn't pay the counter and we set off to the light brown and beige concrete building of the station. The overhead of the entrance made me a bit claustrophobic, and it almost brushed the top of Finland's head, but once we came into the main station, the large hall abruptly stopped and was instead a metal roof that multiplied the sounds. In the middle multiple shops sprung up like mushrooms and there were the tracks on the far side.

"There." Estonia pointed to the far end of the station.

"Attention passengers, train 086 is departing in five minutes. Train 086 is departing in five minutes." The loudspeaker boomed.

"We cut close." Finland grabbed my hand like I was a five year old and ran to the platform. There was no line, but the attending was very surprised and a little angry. She took the tickets Finland gave her with a haughty air and bowed us in.

"You didn't have to take me by the hand you know," I mumbled while rubbing my wrist. Finland's hand was smaller than my wrist so he grabbed it with much force to account for the fact that he couldn't grasp it's circumference. The train was open, but there were tables instead of just seats. The whole train was white, orange and red themed. The tablecloth was pristine white over a marble like table that was obviously fake. The orange seats were covered in dyed leather and were cold because of the conditioned air running from the top of the ceiling.

"Anteeksi." Finland said as Estonia appeared and seated himself next to me facing him. "I wanted you to move faster. You looked dreamy from the start when I just met you."

"Dreamy..." nobody ever told me I was 'dreamy'. Maybe I've never met people who actually told me the truth.

"Yeah," Finland took out a pair of black wireless earphones and tapped on his phone. "Like your eyes aren't focused. And you mumble. And you're reserved."

"You're describing yourself." Estonia pointed out.

"Without the mumbling. I don't do that." Finland corrected.

"Sometimes." Estonia finished mischievously. They laughed, and soon I could hear the whistle of the horn and felt the motion of acceleration. The train moved out of the metal overhead and more people shuffled into the compartment, and soon enough the car felt just like the city, full of talk, mindless chatter, shuffling, zipping, laughing and crying. Mostly, the compartment was full of university students, but here and there older people with children sat down, isolated and left out of the young and excited students. The city started to flash by, and all of the cars, people and apartments soon disappeared into a tunnel, and the yellowed lights flickered on quite quickly. The loud bearings of the train echoed through the car and the shadows danced around the company, who now we're subdued once the initial rush and frenzy was over, and everyone reduced their voices to either whispers or low volume talk. Then, as soon as we got accustomed to the yellowed lights and the dark, the train emerged into a rural area and picked up speed. Estonia flipped through a book and unwrapped a fish sandwich out of a plastic bag. I might have been staring again, because his eyes met mine.

"Yes?" He asked.

"Oh, sorry." I apologised. "I was just...well, it was...sorry."

"That's okay." He set the sandwich on the table. "I sometimes stare and can't get out of trance."

"Yeah."

"Are you worried?" Estonia said. "I mean, you have been like Finland said, Dreamy."

"Kind of." I admitted. "but more like, I don't know what's going on. It's too fast."

"Yeah, Mr. U.K. is, unfortunately, a man of secrecy. He sends out letters at the last moment. You sometimes can't process it."

"I've never really met people, by myself."

"That's your worry?" Finland interjected. "Please, it's easy."

"Says the anti social being that I found in the library who begged me to become friends because he didn't have any?" Estonia told him, sceptical.

"Ah, not me." Finland averted his gaze in mock guilt. "Definitely NOT me."

"Oh, Russia. I think people here are nice. Really nice." Estonia addressed me again. "It's not like our school back at home. It's better, way better." He paused and looked back at Finland. "Hey, you know what? Finland's brother is coming too. Do you want to meet him?"

"Um, sure?"

"Iceland?" Finland asked. "Oh yeah, you'll be the Dream Team. Iceland is you to the power of natural logarithm in social interaction. You'll be best friends."

"That would be great!" Estonia chirped. "Right, Russia?"

"Yeah." It sounded like I was mumbling again. I hoped this Iceland person wasn't too taken aback at my unenthusiastic look.

"Iceland." Finland typed on his phone. "With our luck, he might be on the train."

"Wouldn't that be great?" Estonia said to me.

"Yeah?" I shrugged. "I mean, yes, it is."

"Just like Father." Estonia turned towards me to watch the landscape, which turned murkier and less settled by the second. "When you aren't comfortable, you mumble."

"Well, sorry."

"That's exactly what your dad said to me too." Finland didn't look up from his phone, but he had a smile on his face. "In that exact tone." Silence greeted his words. But Finland didn't seem bothered, instead he turned his gadget off and stowed it in his pocket. "Iceland is here, and is coming. Melting, more like." Indeed, Iceland was coming. How did I know it was him? He walked into the crowd without even blinking when people pushed past him or whispered behind him. He had a hood surrounding his face, and it shrouded his features. He sat down next to Finland and moaned loudly. Finland ripped the hood off his head and made a presenting motion.

"Iceland," Finland introduced me and his sibling. "This is Russia. Russia, this is Iceland, my brother. He's extremely shy and mopey."

"I was okay back there." Iceland moaned. "Your compartment is too loud." Although he didn't look taller than Finland, he was still a little taller than me. He had a grey puffy jacket on with what looked like real fur trim. His blue face was cut with a overlapping white and red horizontal crosses, and he had very a very unique light red eyes unlike his brother or anyone I've met before. He looked at me with disinterest and went back to moaning to his brother.

"Finland." Iceland started again.

"Okay, I was just going to help you," Finland snapped back at him. "But you're going to sit here and talk because you came to help yourself and Russia."

"How?"

"By talking. Sharing experience."

"Fine." Iceland said. "Hi. My name is Iceland. My life is boring. I probably got into the school because they thought I'd be as good as my brother. I don't know what I want. The campus is too big. I have no friends. The end. And you?" He said all of that in one flat tone.

"Um, my name is Russia. I don't think my life is boring, it's been too worrying. I actually got into this school by miracle, and I am going to be enrolling into the Engineering programme. I've seen the campus, but only some of it, and I also have no friends here." I finished awkwardly. I noticed that Iceland was looking at me with more interest than before.

"Why by miracle?" He asked.

"Well, I'm not close to anyone at campus, I can't really pay for my own tuition, I'm not a great test taker either. But what I can do is get the job done, one way or the other."

"Oh, that's interesting." Iceland cocked his head to one side. "Finland said I have to pay for myself, since we can pay for tuition. I'll be a slave of my own debt for the rest of my life."

"You'll be doing work-study." Finland patted him on the back. "Just like Norway."

"Ugh." Iceland sighed. "See? They hate me." I shrugged in reply. To my surprise, he laughed.

"You're funny." He said. "Maybe I'll stay being your friend." He reached out to shake my hand. It was rougher than I expected, but it was warm and a bit scarred. "Do you know anything about fishing or boating?"

"A little. I went ice fishing with my father once. I almost died of boredom." He laughed again.

"Russia, I should give you an award." Estonia said. "You made Iceland change his facial expression to joy."

"Well, he knows what kind of a boring thing ice fishing is!" Iceland told him. "I thought only I couldn't stand the awfulness of ice fishing. It's kind of boring. Only Denmark and Faeroe can get

excited about it." Then he added to me. "Those are my sisters."

"I have many siblings too." I said. "Estonia is actually my brother."

"Really?" Iceland asked. "He's your brother?" I nodded.

"I didn't know that." He crossed his arms on his chest. "Hey, we're almost here. I'd better get my stuff." He was right. The high fields and steppes were replaced with a smoky city filled with smokestacks, funnels, grey and cobbled buildings, and a grey haze everywhere, surrounding everything. My lip curled at the polluted air that I was going to be expected to breathe in all day.

"See you on the platform." He waved to me and left. Meanwhile, the train stopped and the loudspeaker outside announced our arrival. Finland handed me my suitcase and rucksack and we headed on the platform. The arid smell filled my lungs and I couldn't help but cough. The thick haze was surrounding everything and you couldn't see farther than three metres in front of you. The overhead of the station magnified the chatter yet again and after waiting for Iceland, we set out of the station.

"I remember the campus being...cleaner." I pointed out.

"Yeah, if you came to the campus by car during admissions, you didn't see this." Iceland said. "I did. It was worse before."

"I can't imagine anything worse." I admitted. We walked around, and Iceland showed me around the city. Once or twice Finland looked back at us and smiled.

"Thanks for cheering him up. I've never seen him that chatty before." He nodded at Iceland. "I usually have to do that. It's gotten to be a pain." I nodded in agreement. I had problems with my own emotional well-being, but I was the oldest in my immediate family, so I had to deal with it. I walked side by side with Iceland, and we talked about things of little importance. At least I knew his favourite colour was red. That's very informative. But he also talked about his family, where they lived, and how many siblings he had. He said that Finland was his favourite person, and he would always be with him, until the latter left for university. After that, he said

that it was hard to find a social life, be motivated and have optimism.

"My father made sure I didn't have time to think about life." I explained. "He made sure that I didn't fall into depression by making me do work. If I did it all, he gave me more. He sometimes made up work for me."

"I wasn't given that. I had all the time in the world to think." Iceland pointed to his brother. "He didn't let me do anything but fishing and boating with Norway." I looked up at where we were going and saw the tall spires at the end of a field surrounded by a gate.

"We're here." Estonia told us.

-Tu Noveristi- You will know, read the sign on the gate.

Anteeksi - sorry/excuse me

Very long chapter, Anteeksi! I did not realize that I wrote so much. I hope this make up for the time that I have not published. Happy Reading and Winter celebrations!

The first day gone awry

[image]

"Guten Morgen, Deutschland." I heard a whisper. For a second I thought it was my father, but then I thought my father couldn't have such a thick accent. A soft prod in my side made me open my eyes half way and the half light filtered in the room. Instead, Finland's was in my view, smiling.

"Hey," he said again. "I learned that phrase from my friend. Did you like it?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Did I miss anything?"

"No." He opened the blackout curtains so the light came through. The weather outside was as usual. Grey, with drizzle banging lightly on the glass pane. "I'm going to get breakfast. Do you want to come?"

"I will." He nodded and went outside, probably to light his e-cigarette. I sighed and went to change clothes, made the bed rather roughly, and washed my face. I left my glasses where they were the night before. The cold water woke me up completely and when I manages to dry my face and put my glasses on, Finland was waiting near the door.

"Impressing someone?" He eyed my clothing choice.

"No, I always dress like this."

"Dressing for success?" He opened the door and then locked it back. "Not that I do." We left Oak College and turned the sort of familiar route that we took in the evening. The Hall came into view and Finland broke into a run. Even though we kept a fast pace, we still were more wet than dry when we came into the warm hall. I didn't eat much, since the midday meal was the biggest, but the person

who sat next to me was eating lavishly. Finland was eying the person with uncertainty. I guess he recognised him, since the latter definitely did.

"Hey!" The person's voice resonated so loudly that I had the urge to clap my hands over my ear canals. "Finn! What's up?"

"Hello America." Finland said coolly. "Nothing is up. I am fine."

"Always a basket of joy!" I got the feeling that America spoke in exclamation marks. He wore sunglasses that perched on his head but his eyes were sort of naive looking. Judging what I've heard about him, he was far from it. He was certainly a rebel figure with his black t-shirt, ripped denim jeans and flat bottomed sneakers. I remembered USSR had a particular distaste for the "meddling teenager" who liked fast food, baseball and speaking for freedom. He had some rights to my land and used them quite often. "And who are you?" He asked me suddenly.

"Germany..." I trailed off quietly.

"Germa what?" He asked again. "Speak louder!"

"Germany." I finally managed. Wasn't this guy one of my guardians? Shouldn't he know my name?

"Well hello Germany!" He shook my hand enthusiastically. "I would say how are you, but I don't want to repeat my question ten times in a row."

"Really America?" Another voice spoke up. "Not everyone is outgoing like you."

"Or has two mouths and one ear." Said another.

"Hello y'all." America bounced off the insult and returned a smile. "My favourite Korea brothers."

"You excited?" South Korea sat down opposite to me and waved. "Hi Germany."

"You know him?" America said incredulously.

"Yeah, we met at the introduction ceremony." South explained to him. "Italy is behind you." I felt like somebody was choking me, but it was actually someone hugging my neck uncomfortably.

"South! I was going to surprise him." Italy was mock offended. "Hi Germany!"

"Hi." I said.

"Germany, if you didn't get a formal introduction, this is America, my loud, obnoxious, a bit stupid, but loyal, unbridled, enthusiastic and great friend."

"So many adjectives." America said. "I'm not loud, for your information."

"But you are obnoxious, not to mention stupid." North Korea muttered. Again, America did a very non American thing of ignoring him.

"Anyway." America continued. "Who has my dad's class this morning? I have a nasty surprise for them. That's why I'm here, not with my family."

"What did you do?" South asked expectantly.

"I broke my dad's teacup. One that he likes. He might be foul for the rest of the day." I looked at my schedule that I had folded up in my pocket. Sure enough, English.

"Yay." I half whispered to Italy. He smiled apologetically back to me.

"Mi dispiace, Germany." He said. "It'll probably be bad. I've never seen him angry before."

"Hey, you have my dad first?" America asked me, loudly, of course.

"Yeees." I said slowly. Finland laughed in the background. He probably thought I was being sarcastic.

"Good for you. Don't worry, he'll just look mad, that's all." He patted

my shoulder. "Oh the time, the time," he said in a mock British accent and put his sunglasses back on. "Tata everyone. We you all soon."

"Bye America, have a great day." Italy chirped.

"Bye America!" South said and also rose to leave.

"Bye," I waved. North said nothing, but nodded. The whole hall seemed to start to leave.

"I'm going," Finland sighed and put his dishes on an already careening cart. "Let's go." We made it to our room in record timing, mostly because Finland started to run right after we got out. In three minutes or so, we were there. "Do you have your schedule?"

"Yes." I was breathless from the run.

"Do you know where to go?"

"Yes."

"Well then, have a good day, I'll see you soon." With that, he flung his bag over his shoulder and waved to me. "Nähdään pian."

"Nähdään pian." I imitated him and he smiled. I unfolded the schedule again and scanned through it. English 3 for foreigners, Economics 1, Calculus 2, Chemistry 3, History 2 and Engineering 1. I was content with everything but Engineering. I didn't like it. But I had to take it for something I couldn't remember. I guess I'll have to pull through then. Without further ado, I went to the first lesson of English. Next to Sky Hall, the language hall, with the name Arbour Hall, was carved out of wood and stone. Along with other students, I made my way to the class 276. I took my seat in the front row, but not in the centre. After a few minutes the class was half full with chatting students and a burly man came in whom I thought was the teacher until I remembered that Mr. UK taught the class. Instead, the man sat down right behind me and took out a book. I dared not to look back. At the same moment, Mr. UK stormed into the class and slammed a book down onto the small raised podium on the side of the blackboard. The man behind me laughed quietly. I didn't see

what was funny.

"Pardon me," Mr. UK apologised. "I had to resolve a small...issue."

"That is okay." Said a voice in the back.

"Thank you." He nodded. "Now, I want to introduce you formally to myself. My name is Mr. UK, and I teach all levels, well most levels anyway, and I am also the headmaster. We have some students who were put into this level so, welcome to Croatia, Brunei and Russia as well as everyone else in the class." I had a feeling who the person behind me was. The lesson was quite interesting, and I didn't have time to think about anything else. As soon as Mr. UK announced the class to be over, the large man, who I think could've squashed Mr. UK without much effort, went up to him and started to talk.

"Don't worry." Mr. UK told him. "It takes a while to learn that. We don't use them much anyway."

"Okay, thank you." He said back. He had an accent, though not as bad as I thought, and it reminded me of someone familiar, like USSR. I shook my head again and focused to go to my next class, which I had to run to, since it was at the other end of campus.

A few classes later, I happily made my way to the second to last class of the day-Economics. Unlike the old fashioned classroom with a blackboard and podium like Mr. UK's, this room was dark blue walled with different charts and graphs pasted here and there. The desks were arranged in a circle formation and I spotted America sitting in a laid back position, staying silent, miraculously. Unconsciously, I sat next to him, and when he noticed, he waved to me with a smile.

"Hey Germany!" This time he wasn't as loud, but some students still turned and giggled. "You're taking Economics?"

"Yes." I took out the textbook we were to use in class.

"This is by far my favourite class." He turned to the rest of the students. "Even though I'm supposed to be in second year, I stayed back in first grade. Can you believe it? First grade! I don't even

remember what I did."

"Probably nothing then, America."

"Hey!" America took off his glasses and placed them on the table. "My favourite guy, well, teacher."

"Let me introduce myself." The man said calmly and sat down with the rest of the students. "Hello everyone, my name is Mr. Indonesia, but please call me just Indonesia, I'm not a sticker for titles and rules. We're here to learn about Economy, not grade school discipline, I know some professors like that. Welcome to Economics 1, we'll be learning a lot, and just to be safe, we'll start with the basics, calculations and such. Now we can start. A question already America?" He sighed exasperated. His face was white and red going across his face horizontally. He was dressed casually, with knee length light brown shorts, a white t-shirt with IUUP emblazoned on the front, and a no'n la' hat. His face looked kind and he smiled in America's direction.

"Yes. Can we start with compound interest?"

"That's not part of the curriculum." Indonesia said. "If you want extra help or learn something new, visit me during office hours."

"Okay." America sat back down.

"Now," Indonesia continued calmly. "I like this format of teaching in a circle. I feel like we got to know each other better. Anyone care to start their introduction?" The few students around us mumbled their introductions and most of them were in second year. "Great!" Indonesia clapped when each person finished.

"Hey everyone," America stood up. "My name's America, obviously. I'm first year, and I'm Economics major. This is my favourite place to be with the best people on Earth."

"Thank you, Germany?" Indonesia gestured to me.

"Hi, my name is Germany. I am a first year student. I don't know what major I want yet, but maybe Economics. I like the school." I finished quietly and sat down.

"Very nice." Everyone in the small room clapped not really enthusiastically. There were about six students including me, and I forgot their names as soon as they sat back down. "So what we'll start with what is Economics. We can have an open discussion..." The class was great, and was very comfortable. The next class I had want one I liked at all: Engineering. Great. I trudged down the steps to the physics building to the second floor. The classroom was built like a workshop. Three work tables were set up and the class was almost full. Well, maybe, I couldn't guess the sizes. I noticed the man who laughed behind me in English class. He was sitting at one of the tables, talking to a cheerful looking girl. Her white face was accented with a red dot in the middle. She had strange looking cat ears on her head and she wore a oversized pink sweater and a navy blue skirt. She was doing most of the talking. The other tables were louder so I had to sit next to her.

"Hi." She said to me.

"Hello." I said uncertainty in my voice.

"What's your name?"

"Germany." Was it my imagination or did the man's eyes narrow?

"Hi Germany! I'm Japan, and this is Russia. We were just talking about careers and stuff." She put a hand over Russia's waist and tried to yank him forward. He stubbornly refused to do so. He reminded me of USSR in many ways. He had a grey ushanka on his head, a light black jacket with something in Russian stitched on it. His face was white blue and red, and his eyes were full of suspicion and a little boredom. They were also a captivating purple. I only realised I was starting when Japan prodded me. "What's your major going to be?"

"Eh, well, probably math. I really don't know."

"I think I'm going into Information Technology." Japan said. "Russia said he wants to do-,"

"This." He said, but it sounded more like a growl. It was definitely the person that was behind me in the English class, I had no doubts.

"Engineering, he means." Japan explained to me. "Hey, where is your Ice friend?"

"What Ice friend?" He asked her. "You mean Iceland?"

"Yeah, Iceland. The melty one."

"He is not melty. He's my roommate." Russia said to her. "And friend."

"I see." She nodded. "Probably more than friends, right?"

"Um, no." He spoke without a trace of embarrassment, which meant it was true. For some reason I felt relieved when I heard that. Why did I care who this guy was friends with? "He's someone I met on the train here."

"Aha." Japan's ears drooped a bit with disappointment.

"Sorry that your weird dream didn't come true." Russia smiled. "For all your soothsayer abilities you talk about, this was the weakest prediction of all."

"I think I'm half right though." She crossed her arms. "You don't crush on girls."

"I don't crush on anyone." Russia raised his eyebrows. "I am here to get an education, not to play frivolous games of who I love and who I don't. It didn't work out last time."

"Last time it was just bad timing." Japan said. "Now you can decide who you want for yourself."

"How did we get on this subject?" Russia shook his head. "I don't know anything about this so it's like asking a wall, why was it built. A wall can't answer, so can't I."

"Bad comparison, Russia." Japan told him in mock seriousness. "You are bad at comparing."

"Its not my strength, the nuances of English." He shrugged. "What are you doing in Engineering anyway?" At first I thought he was

addressing Japan, but his lavender eyes were trained on me, like an eagle swooping down on its prey. Too bad I was the prey.

"Me?" I asked.

"Who else?"

"Well, I, um, you know...My well, not real father, but, um." I couldn't get my words to form a sentence. I gave up when he threw his arms in the air.

"Genius!" He said. "Just brilliant. I would also go into Engineering because of um, well, and you know."

"Russia," Japan sighed. "Don't be sarcastic. That's how we lose friends." She loudly whispered to me. "I'm trying to get him more friends rather than letting him stick with melty face."

"Japan, you make up for ten people in my life." Russia said.

"Your life must be pretty dull then." She decided.

"It actually was dull." He growled. "Half the time my father wasn't even there to help me. Where he was I don't know. Probably dating someone."

"See Russia, now it's your turn to go date someone. I already have a great girl for you in mind."

"Who?" He drawled.

"One of my friends," Japan purred. "Bangladesh is her name."

"Япония, I don't even know who you're talking about." He huffed.

"She's not at this university but..."

"Then I'm not interested." Russia finished for her. As soon as he said that, a lythe middle aged man came striding in. He had light blue skin, and his flag almost matched that of Netherlands'. He looked easy going and clapped for everyone's attention.

"Hello everybody! Not going to welcome you all, you have to welcome yourselves into this class. I'm sure your other professors bored you with their long welcomes and what is your name kind of thing, so we'll just get started." He paused for a little bit. "My name's Luxembourg, that's all you have to know. Now, this class is just the basic engineering course. We'll be starting simple, obviously, and we will definitely be using calculus and physics in this class. Mostly, we'll be using our hands and what we have in our heads. So without further ado, let's begin!" Japan clapped and Luxembourg bowed in her direction. "Thank you Japan. Now we have to apply integrals and derivatives as well as remembering our rules for differentiation. Don't forget those. Also remember that we need to use physics. So mechanics play a large role in what we do. In case you forget," he went up to the board and scribbled some equations on top. "I'll write them on the board. Okay, onward!" There was shuffling of paper and pencil from the small group.

"I've never touched this stuff before." Japan looked at the metal slates that were stacked on the work table.

"Don't worry." Luxembourg jumped in between me and Japan. "Its easy. We won't be starting with metals today. Just the application of equation to a physical thing."

"Okay." She said. Her ears twitched nervously.

"Russia," Luxembourg stopped mid-sentence.

"Yes?" He stopped what he was doing.

"How are you doing that?" Luxembourg pointed at the messy notes on Russia's paper. I hastily started to follow the vague instructions on the board in the front.

"Am I not supposed to?" Russia asked. Even though he sounded calm, there was some hints of fear in his voice, as if he was scared to defy and anger the small person who was the professor.

"That's actually, pretty advanced. Where did you learn those?"

"My father." Russia said simply. Luxembourg nodded slowly and

smiled.

"You know what? Come here, I want you to try something." He led Russia to another work table and murmured something to him. I turned back to my frustrating paper. After ten minutes of petty derivative extraction with natural logarithmic functions, I got a somewhat believable answer only to see that I was only on step one.

"Not working out?" Japan asked me. "What did you get?"

"My derivative is more complex than my original." I complained. "How is that supposed to be?"

"Oh, I got the same." She noticed. "I guess our math skills are okay. Or maybe we're both wrong."

"The math part isn't hard. It's the physics."

"You're right. Wind resistance is awful." She laughed. "But I'm not a professional when it comes to mechanics either. I like my code. Luxembourg said next time he'll have a formal lesson. Today's just like, an introduction to our skills."

"You talked to him?" I asked.

"Yeah, me and Russia did. Before classes started." She told me. She was cut off by Luxembourg.

"Japan, is he your friend?" Luxembourg looked at her.

"We met at Sky Hall. At the welcome speech."

"This guy's brilliant. I've never seen first years operate that kind of machinery. Who taught you again?"

"My father." Russia fiddled with a screwdriver until it dropped on the floor.

"Well, your father needs some sort of monument." Luxembourg looked around the classroom. Many people were already finished. My project was done half way. "Okay guys. I think time's up. I'm sorry today's class was boring, but next time I will be teaching,

okay?" He waved to the departing students. As it was the last class of the day, I decided to hang back with Japan and Russia. Actually, Japan made me stay by yanking my shirt when I started to leave.

"It's okay if we stay right?" Japan asked.

"Sure." Luxembourg gestured to two seats. "I just want to write Britain a letter. I want Russia to assistant teach with me. Hope you don't mind Russia?"

"I don't." He hopped up and sat on one of the work tables. "Don't expect enthusiasm."

"I don't expect anything but your assistance." Luxembourg kept typing on the keyboard. "Frankly, I'm not that enthusiastic myself. I just want to get the students ready. Next class will be pretty tough for some people. A lot of people drop this class, and by the time the deadline for dropping classes is over, I only have about four students left." He finally finished typing. "And send. Okay, I sent the letter, hopefully he'll approve, you are way too good for this class. Even for the next level class. What type of engineering do you want to do?"

"There are three types that I'm sort of leaning to." Russia started. "Mechanical was my first choice, but then I was looking at nuclear and naval engineering as well."

"Good choices." He leaned back in his chair. "You'd be good at mechanical and naval, but I don't know much at nuclear, so I can't judge." He shrugged apologetically. "But that's a good career path. We have some internships with companies and factories that have good starting salaries. With a strong four year degree, you can start work and continue with your master's and even doctorate." Russia nodded but said nothing.

"Thank you." He said after a long pause.

"My pleasure. Have a great day. Stop by tomorrow and I'll have an answer by then."

"Bye!" Japan skipped out into the already empty hall. "Russia, we're

meeting your melty guy at the gate right? I want to go today, since the professors didn't have enough time to assign homework today. Too busy for them." The rain had thankfully stopped and some blue patches of sky were starting to show.

"It's Iceland." Russia said stubbornly, clearly ignoring everything else Japan said. "Not melty face."

"Okay, okay." She sighed. "You're no fun. Hey, care to join us, Germany, right? I don't want to be all alone with two depressed icebergs."

"Now I'm an iceberg." Russia muttered. "Yay."

"I can come, sure." I agreed.

"Do you need to put stuff away?" She asked. "Because we're going to the city park."

"No. I only have two afternoon classes. Both without books."

"Good. Great. Fantastic!" She exclaimed. "There's melty face." She gestured towards a sad looking figure trudging along.

"Hey Iceland." Russia called. The melancholic figure turned to us and then positively smiled. He seemed to straighten up and walked to us. He was a bit overdressed and was very tall. When he spoke his voice sounded like ice cracking.

"Hey, Russia." They did a complicated sort of handshake and laughed. "Hi Japan."

"Hi melty face." Her ears perked up. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing. Much." He spoke in very short sentences, just like Finland. "Who's that...again? I definitely remember you from somewhere... "

"This," Japan took my shoulders. "Is Germany. He's our friend now."

"How'd he become our friend again?" Russia asked sarcastically. "I wasn't there on that part."

"In class. He seemed lonely, so we took him in." She smiled back at me. "Right?"

"Yeah." I nodded. It was partially the truth. Now that I thought, Iceland was already introduced by Finland to me. I'm guessing he hasn't told Japan anything about me.

"I have to introduce you again. This is melty face, who prefers the name Iceland. This is Russia, who I haven't made a name for yet. These two are roommates, so they're friends forever, nothing I can do about it, and me and Russia and Iceland met at the welcome speech. Now we met you. " she finished. She then rolled the sleeves of her pink sweater up and put her hands on her hips. "Icebergs, are we going or what?"

"Да, да," Russia waved his hand, simultaneously talking with Iceland.

"Don't you 'da da' me," Japan pushed between them. Again, I felt some sort of relief in my chest, like it was constricted but then let go. Strange. And worrying. "Come on."

"We're going Japan." Iceland's voice finally dropped that icy feature and it was replaced by a baritone pitch. Japan led the way, swinging her red messenger bag wherever she could. We left the grounds and entered the large city once again. The afternoon was quieter than when I arrived days before, and there were less people out on the street. We rounded a corner and then walked down another street for three more blocks until we reached a tranquil looking park. A rusty sign was nailed to a gate reading 'quiet meadow park'.

"Isn't this the place where people sell illegal drugs?" Russia casually broke the silence. "It's what this place is famous for, I believe?"

"Firstly Russia," Japan turned around and looked at Russia with an authoritative glare. The drastic difference in their heights slightly dampened the effect. "A lesson in English. No one says 'I believe' anymore. It's stupid and outdated. Secondly, we came for a walk not to discuss the horrible histories of parks in this place. Now, can we please enjoy the nice little park?"

"Yes, Japan." Iceland bowed in her direction. "We all know who's the boss around here. Lead the way."

"Thank you." She flicked her ear at Russia and tugged him by the hand. Russia let out an animated groan and let her drag him to the other side of the gate. After that point he easily shook her off.

"Now I can walk my self thanks." He laughed.

"What are you studying for again?" Iceland asked him.

"Engineering. I'm thinking of three categories." Russia explained. "Either Mechanical, to help manage my father's business, Naval, I had that thought on the whim, I like the water and Nuclear, an idea that came into my head when I came here."

"Interesting." Iceland murmured clearly uninterested. "If you are going into the Naval field, we might run into each other. I'm going to be helping Norway with her fishing thing."

"Fishing thing?" Japan asked. "Do you mean a boat?"

"Yes. A boat." Iceland corrected himself. "Not just any boat. An icebreaker. Norway can't hear half of what I say because she's always next to that awful motor and grinders."

"Must be tough." Russia conceded. "My father works at a factory. The noise there from the machinery is so loud that I cannot even hear my own thoughts. One almost ripped my arm out of its socket."

"TMI." Japan was both groaning and laughing at the same time. "Too much information Russia. Too much."

"What are you doing, Japan?" Iceland said, almost crashing into a lamppost while doing so.

"Ah, IT." She sighed. "Everything else seems either too easy or too hard." The road became smaller, and we were forced to move in twos. I was surprised when I saw Russia next to me, his lavender gaze cold and unwelcoming. He looked at me with a mix of disgust, disappointment and anger. I had no idea why and didn't open my

mouth to ask.

"What?" He asked after a minute. Again, I felt that I was staring for too long. I felt my face grow hot and bent my head, muttering something about the weather. He narrowed his eyes and frowned. "You are one of the strangest people I've met, you know."

"Really?" I lifted my eyes but not my head and kept my voice in a low mutter.

"Really." He ducked to avoid a branch in his way. "You're pretty meek and polite for...never mind."

"For being my father's son?" I whispered. "Is that what you mean?" I didn't want to cry, but tears threatened to come out of my eyes and my throat started to burn slightly. It felt like a salt ball was lodged in my throat. I swallowed and shoved the burning sensation down. Russia was clearly uncomfortable now and kept silent for a while. Japan and Iceland were far ahead and didn't notice or hear what was going on behind them.

"Sorry." He finally said, but faced forward instead of to me and didn't meet my eye. "Old habit. They die hard."

"I know." I nodded. Silence was in the tense air again. We walked, the only sound was the ones of our feet on the little paved walkway, and the wind in the air.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know. I don't know how to talk to people without making them cry or hurl things at me. I only can interact with placid lakes like Iceland and cats like Japan." He finished, his face becoming redder as he continued. Surprisingly, his rough apology was sincere and it calmed me a little.

"It's sort of my fault too. I shouldn't become unglued like that because of my dad." I admitted. He smiled awkwardly at me and adjusted his ushanka, tying the earflaps on the top.

"I know your dad really well too." I said quickly to switch the subject. He cocked his head to the side and blinked twice.

"Are you serious?" He asked. The paved path became rocky and I

noticed that Iceland and Japan were waiting a little farther up. Japan waved for us to come over. Russia ran to her and was there in less than four strides. I made my way there a bit slower.

"Look at the view." She breathed. The path ended abruptly at a sheer cliff face. There was a small gorge that was cut out by a river, which was now a little babbling brook on the bottom. The rocky face was grey, with little seams of soil running down like veins. The sun hovered right above the cliff making the view spectacular. "Isn't it nice?"

"It is." I said. I never stopped to look at such scenery. It was calming and quiet to see the beautiful gorge.

"You should come up north." Iceland commented. "I have one of those outside my window at home."

"I have a mountain face." Japan traced a mountain shape in the air. "How about you two?"

"I have a road. And a freeway exit." I said simply.

"I have a field, then forest, then more grassland, then village." Russia kept looking over the edge. "I like the change of scenery." Everyone nodded in agreement. "Does anyone run in the morning?"

"Nope." Japan shook her head. "Don't have time."

"I would, if you wake me up." Iceland offered. "Finland would like it if I did."

"I will come here." Russia turned away from the setting sun. "If anyone else wants to join us, we'll be here. At five thirty."

"Five thirty?" Japan squealed. "I can't wake up that early even if my life depended on it."

"I could maybe." I said. "I've never ran before. I mean, as a routine."

"Well, I haven't either." Iceland smiled. "So if you come tomorrow, I won't be alone."

"I guess I could." I nodded. "At five thirty?"

"Yes. Tomorrow, five thirty. If you change your mind Japan, you can still come." Russia said.

"Maybe." She flicked her ears. "Let's get going." In the setting sun we made our way back to the campus as the sun finally set. As I fell asleep a few hours later, I wondered what I signed up for.

Guten Morgen, Deutschland - Good morning, Germany

Mi dispiace- I'm sorry

Nähdään pian - see you soon

Япония - Japan

Да - yes

I have lost track of how much I've written, so the chapter became very long and I had to cut it off. I promise that the next one will be a bit shorter. Thank you for understanding.

Gossip, rumours and lies

[image]

I was woken from a dark dream by a violent shake. It was still semi dark outside and I could make out the light posts which were still burning brightly. Finland, whom I found out was an early bird was at the work table, listening to music through a new pair of wireless headphones and turned o the light as soon as I stirred.

"Good morning." He said curtly. "Wie geht's?"

"Fine. Tired." I said. "Who is teaching you?"

"Estonia. And Austria." Finland adjusted his posture and looked at me with his piercing blue gaze. "He might be one of your relatives, actually."

"Who?" I felt like I had carried ten bags of grain on my back as I slid into the washroom.

"Austria. He prefers Dr. Austria." He smirked. "We all call him that in his face, but never when he's not around."

"I see." I was truthfully not in the mood, and was paying no attention to what Finland was saying. I would regret that later. "Should I go?"

"Definitely." Finland nodded. "It'll help you clear your head. I also run, but earlier."

"Earlier?" I was shocked. I couldn't even function earlier than this.

"I'm an early bird, what can I say." He smiled again. It was true though. He would go to sleep very early in the evening, at around twenty thirty (20:30) and didn't sleep for long. "Good luck."

"Kiitos." I surprised him at the last second by pushing the limits of my Finnish knowledge. He nodded back at me but said nothing in return. The hazy morning was something Finland told me to get used to. The lamps started to shut off to let the sun warm the earth, but it was still very dark. I walked out of the gate and almost forgot where I was going until a car whizzed by me and I jumped back to avoid the grit from it's tires. The two blocks seemed a little familiar to me already, and when I saw the gate to the park I couldn't help but sigh, since the last thing I needed was to get lost. As soon as I leaned on the gate and felt the little breeze on my face, a cold hand tapped my shoulder. I turned to see Iceland and Russia one a bit sluggish, the other bright eyed, respectively.

"Hello." Iceland yawned.

"Hi." I answered, unsure of what response or how I should be feeling. Did they want me to be excited about this? Or did they care less? More importantly, did Russia care that I was here?

"Since you two are with me, we'll do a small loop." Russia made a circle around the small map talked to a wooden board just to the left of the gate. It was old and a bit rotted out, but the map looked fresh and seemed to be changed out if one became too soggy or matted. The loop Russia showed was still bigger than I expected, and I could see doubt in Iceland's red eyes. "Is that okay?"

"Russia, please remember we're not all yelled at by our fathers to run five hundred kilometres a day." Iceland stifled a second yawn. He was dressed lightly today, wearing a white t-shirt with 'Scandinavia' written in black across his chest, and a pair of black slacks to match with it. In the relatively cold weather, he wasn't shivering. Nor was Russia, who was wearing a light v neck shirt and black pants that were cropped at the shin. I wondered if it was a fashion statement or it was just that he couldn't afford to wear something better. The third option was that he couldn't care less since he was in a park, with nobody to impress. A crucifix on a simple brown leather string/thin rope hung from around his neck. His grey ushanka was ever present on his head. Doesn't he ever get hot in it? That wasn't a question you couldn't ask.

"I remember." Russia replied lightly. "If you get tired, you can

always walk. It's a loop; we'll be able to meet up somewhere. If we do get lost, just come to the gate, I won't leave until you all meet me. Deal?"

"Sounds great." Iceland gave a thumbs up.

"Yeah." I said. I now wondered if I could even run half of what he showed. Russia traced the route with his finger again, and then muttered something to himself. He then shook his head, clapped his hands together and smiled.

"Ну чё, поехали!" And he took off, at relatively fast pace. Iceland shrugged and dashed after him. After another moment, I followed suit. The air hit my face with the first tendrils of cold creeping into the warm atmosphere. It would soon get colder, since it was the period of Indian Summer, when there was a little grace period, a little summer in the middle of the cold. I must've been pretty out of shape, since I felt breathless after about five minutes. I could hear the footsteps of Russia and Iceland receding in the distance. With those five minute spurts, I managed to catch up to them, after about four of those intervals. Iceland was bent over, breathing hard, while Russia was stretching on a bench near him. "Слабаки." He smirked at me and Iceland. "Have you ever done something like this?"

"No." Iceland shook his head. "I wish you told us about this. I mean, told us that it'd be this hard."

"Well, it's practice." Russia did his final stretch and rolled his shoulders out. "Ready? Practice is the mother of learning. You'll be able to do it after a while of it."

"Wise words." I panted. "I wish I did this as often as you."

"The words aren't mine and the practice isn't mine either. My father forces me to do it."

"Is that English, Russia?" Iceland pointed out. "Because that didn't make any sense. You are very confusing."

"Well, I'm kind of a confusing person." He smiled. "You'll find out soon."

"I'm worried." Iceland's mouth twitched into a smile. Russia shrugged again in response and then signalled us to follow him. Instead of running after him, Iceland decided to walk along the path, me with him. The sun started to shine along the dark path, and I could almost see Russia's disappearing figure in the distance. "The guy runs fast." He remarked.

"Yeah." I agreed. "Are you his flatmate or something?"

"Yes, we share a room. We're in the Pine College. How about you?"

"I'm in Oak. My flatmate is a fourth year student. His name is-,"

"-Finland?" Iceland cut me off.

"How did you know?"

"He said he'd volunteered to fill the odds gap. That's cool though, since he's my brother. He introduced me to Russia, and we became friends." He explained.

"Hey! Where are you?!" We heard Russia's voice way ahead of us. "I'm not going to wait forever."

"Let's go before he comes here." Iceland picked up the pace. "So how about you? How did you find Japan and Russia?"

"Well, they're in my class for engineering. Japan quickly established that I should become their friend." I said. "Actually, I'm not sure yet."

"Yeah, you are." Iceland laughed. "Japan has a friendship extra-sense. If she invited you to come walk in a park, you're definitely a friend. Bad news that most people do become those."

"Well, better than nothing."

"Russia is different. He's picky, with everything. For a guy who ate glue and rats for the winter in a war and has a father whose affection is tougher than steel he's sure picky. With food, with friends, with sleep and with organisation. The first thing we did was we reorganised the whole room together."

"Wow. I didn't know that."

"Nobody does. He wouldn't willingly say anything about his pickyness. Or that he ate rats." Iceland conceded. "Oh, look. The entrance." We saw the rusted golden gate that was the barrier between the forest and the city. In the already risen Sun's light poured across the tips of the trees, making them look ablaze. Russia was already there, his arms crossed and a smirk on his face. He was squinting in the sunlight, since it was shining in his face.

"Hello." He waved to us. "How nice of you to join me."

"Is it?" Iceland asked.

"It is." Russia nodded back. "If we hurry, we'll have enough time to eat and shower."

"Gee, really?" Iceland said sarcastically. "Can we?"

"If you hurry." Russia laced his fingers at the base of his head. "And you too."

"Me?" I asked.

"Who else? What's your name again?" His question slightly ruined the moment.

"Germany." Iceland interrupted. "Russia, his name is Germany. How can you forget your friend's name?"

"I don't know." He said, looking at a large watch strapped to his wrist. "I take German, by the way."

"Wirklich?" I was surprised. Why did he take German? "Warum?"

"Ich weiß nicht. Mein Vater will." He answered. "I really don't know. I'm good at it, so I stayed in the class." He rolled his shoulders one more time. "I still feel stiff. Whatever. Let's go." He shuffled off towards the campus.

"End of conversation, I guess." Iceland signalled me to follow. Russia was muttering in a low voice to himself and Iceland looked

at him with scepticism. The city was now fully awake, with many people were out on the streets, all talking, yelling, laughing and walking about. Russia pushed through the crowd like it was a bramble bush, while Iceland fluidly passed through it like water. I kept saying sorry and excuse me every time I stepped on someone's foot or accidentally pushed somebody out of the way.

"Finally." Russia growled, pushing in between a a couple that was lovingly holding hands. They looked harassed, but he paid them no attention. We came up to the campus gate. "Okay, second day."

"Yay." Iceland sighed. "I think we have history together, Russia."

"Really? Great, I won't die of boredom."

"Maybe, you could, I don't know, pay attention?" Iceland asked innocently. "Maybe then it will be not as boring?"

"Nah, it's history. It's always boring. I've done it in school, I heard it from my history tutor, I've heard it from my father. It depends on your view. One is liberal, the other is an anarchist, the third is a hard conservative. All of them started very calmly, then they all turned to their own ideas and opinions. We should all be helpful and nice, we should all live in the woods and have no laws, or we should all give up our things and live together. All of those things sound stupid."

"I wasn't taught world history at all." Iceland admitted. "So it will be interesting for me."

"I was, in a twisted and distorted way. That was at first. Then of course, I was taught a different view, which was kind of the same." I told them. "I had a tutor at first too."

"Well, we all did. It's a normal and humane thing to be taught a certain way." Iceland said. There was something hidden behind his words. He didn't mean what he said. Russia was looking at me with narrowed eyes. There was understanding in his purple gaze. Understanding and anger. He finally got the final piece of the puzzle together and now he had the whole picture. Who I was, what happened to me and more importantly, who my father was he knew

before, but where his own went to care for me probably made him very mad. His mouth twitched ever so slightly as if he wanted to say something and his face became redder. It was the kind of red of anger, not love.

"Riiight." Russia nodded, his voice strangely high pitched and rough. "Anyway, enough standing around. I need to go. Bye." He waved at me but it looked more like a 'stay really far away from me' sort of gesture. A little balloon of hope deflated in me and I walked down the paved path to my college. The early risers were starting to trickle out of the courtyard and I saw Finland chatting, or in this case listening, to a girl. He recognised me and signalled for me to come over. The girl left as soon as she saw me come over, and I could tack a name on her face anyway.

"How'd it go?" Finland asked. He waved a goodbye to the girl.

"Fine. Who's that?"

"Just fine? It's one of my classmates. She was in my history class in my first year. We did a project together, now we're friends. Her name is Slovakia."

"Oh. Nice. Well, it didn't go as planned." I sighed.

"You didn't get close to Russia?" He mused. He must've seen the redness of my face, because he laughed. "Too close to the truth?"

"It's not...well, I don't know yet."

"You want to be his friend?" Finland asked bluntly. "That's easy. I can arrange it for you even. Just trust me. Tomorrow he'll be right next to you."

"And how is that?" I asked.

"You'll see. Trust the master." He rubbed his hands together and pulled his hood over his head. "You're going to eat, right? If you are, hurry."

"Bye." I said. "And thanks."

"Have a nice day." He nodded to me and I ran up the steps to get my books for the day. Chemistry again today. Music, interesting. Maybe I would see Italy. I scurried down the steps, ran into the dining hall and ate in a record time. All of USSR's lectures of eating slowly evaporated, and I even made it to my Chemistry class before anyone else. It was an airy classroom full of fragile glass and clear plastic bins. Professor Holland, or Netherlands as he preferred to be called was organizing his papers talking to whom I recognised as Denmark. I guess she did too since she averted her gaze to meet mine.

"Hi." She waved to me. "Look, your first student."

"Hi Germany." Netherlands waved at me as well. "How's it going. Did you run here or something?" He joked.

"I did. Yes." I panted. "Sorry for. Interrupting. You."

"That's okay. I'm just setting something up. I want to get down to business today."

"Okay." I watched him talk to Denmark while singlehandedly typing on his computer and organising files. When Denmark left, he cursed loudly in Dutch and dropped the papers on the floor. I went up to help pick them up off of the cold and clean light green tiling.

"Thank you, Germany." He looked gratefully at me. "I'm not a good multitasking person. Sorry for the swear." I smiled back and resumed to the seat and fiddled with a black pen in my hands. The room was colder than normal, and three huge whiteboards were on one side of the class, while different handmade posters of chemical compounds and formulas hid an announcement bulletin. Netherlands' desk was littered with bottles, papers, binders and his stark white monitor rose above the mess. A little golden placard with his full name etched on it stood in a corner, threatening to fall. His desk was like his mind, full of great ideas, but all messed up and disordered. A brown and faded leather chair was pushed to the side, and probably unbeknownst to him, a jagged rip went from the headrest to the arms of the chair, the yellow foam pushing through.

"It's colder here than usual." I commented.

"Yeah, sorry, this place is as glorious as it is old. Nobody bothers to fix the heating systems. I know Britain had his fixed right away. We can ask, but the people who do it take a long time."

"Longer time." I murmured. The rest of the class came into the class, loud and chatty, blocking out my thoughts. My chemistry class was bigger than usual today and somebody familiar sat down next to me. North Korea. I didn't expect him to acknowledge me or talk but he looked at me with his unobscured eye and waved half heartedly.

"Hello." I greeted him.

"Hi." He said gruffly.

"Are you in here? I've never seen you here before."

"I levelled up." While he was saying that, Netherlands stood up and silenced the crowd.

"Hey guys!" He announced and a huff sounded in the back. "And girls, I didn't forget you. We have some new people here, North Korea, Morocco and Lichtenstein. Welcome. Now, I would like to start at our textbook page 23, where we left off last time..." the shuffling of papers was drowning out the rest of the words. We worked through the pages with vigor and the room was more or less quiet.

"Alright, out time is up!" Netherlands said, slamming the book on his table. "Oops. I didn't do that on purpose. Sorry. Well, we will be doing something exciting. With catalysts."

"Bye!" Most of us chorused and moved out of the class. The next class I had was history. This would be interesting. The class looked like Mr. UK's, only it had many old maps and texts on the walls. It was located in Arbour Hall, a level above the English classes. The professor came in to the class, wearing a white dress shirt, khaki polyester pants and a red tie. He looked around the class and smiled.

"Hello class. I am Professor Hungary, and I am the history teacher and administrator of this institution. I welcome you to this class of

World History, where we will be discussing ideas and events in chronological order and in a open format and discussion."

"Can we start with the Wars?" Someone in the back asked. "Specifically, the one that just happened?" The muttering and dissent followed their words.

"I really want to know about USSR." One other person said.

"How about Third Reich?" Another growled.

"What about who started it all?"

"Who would you blame?"

"Why?"

"When?" The talk of these people was getting me nervous, since soon one would notice me and ask. I sunk in my seat, trying to make myself lower.

"We will start from the beginning! Pangaea is where we are going to start." Hungary said, scandalized. Everyone sighed, of boredom, while I did of relief. Not yet, I thought to myself. "I want to start with the Beginning...." the class fell silent and though he was extremely uninteresting, many people weren't asleep on their desks. Instead, they were starting at me. Great. What I didn't want to be was the centre of attention. One person was looking at me but would avert their gaze when I looked at them. Others would stare without remorse. The gossip and rumours were probably crashing around their ears. The Dictator's son was in the same room as them. How wonderful.

Wie geht's - how are you?

Kiitos - thank you

Ну чё, поехали - Well, let's get going

Слабаки - weaklings

Wirklich - really

Warum - why

Ich weiß nicht - I don't know

Mein Vater will - My father wants

Note:

I want to thank everyone who is reading this story, I really appreciate you all for taking your time to read this and voting on it!

Not a Chapter: An Announcement

[image]

Hello all,

Thank you for reading and voting on my story this far. I wanted to announce that I will most likely be shortening the chapters, since I type on a document and I then paste the text into Wattpad. I have noticed that it looked too little on the document, but when I paste it in, I say to myself, Wow, that's way too much.

Hopefully you all agree and I will try to create shorter chapters. (Picture/drawing is not mine-I just found it funny. Credit to whoever made it)

Happy New Year's!!

A Different Path

[image]

This Germany character. I finally figured out who he is. At the time I thought he was a shy looking, too intelligent, too proper and too organised person. I had some doubts about him when he stepped in our engineering class, but I let that slide when Japan asked him to come with us to the park nearby. I trusted Japan's senses of who was an okay person and who wasn't, so I went with the flow. When we were there I asked him, to make sure if my suspicion is correct. They were. He was the son of Third Reich, that man who betrayed father and killed many people for his own cause. It wasn't the fact that he was this dictator's son was what angered me, it was the fact that he stayed silent about it. It was immoral to stay silent about that, he should have at least mentioned it. Then he tried to defend himself afterward! I then found out the next day where father was going all that time. To take care of him! Weren't his own children important?

"Russia, stop muttering down there." Iceland snickered. It was the evening and I haven't talked to Iceland or Japan through the whole day after our encounter with Germany. They were worried at first, but then figured out that I was in a mood and played along, talking to me as if I was going to answer. "Come on, talk to me."

"Hmm." I protested. It was the evening and we had already finished our assignments and ate dinner. Iceland helped me with my English work and I returned the favour by looking over his maths. Both of

us made a huge amount of mistakes, him with his calculations and me with grammar. The best part was I did it in total silence. I never uttered a word and let Iceland finish my thoughts for me. It was hard, a bit frustrating but we allowed through and now he was just trying to do what my father did for years: coaxing.

"Come on." Iceland begged. "I'll do anything. Please, drop it."

"Hmm." I kept on. He was getting desperate. Nice.

"Please Russia." He hung his head over the bottom of his bunk to look down on me. "What's wrong? Tell me. I'm your friend, don't you trust me?"

"Ah." I sighed. "Fine. You got me."

"Yay." Iceland flipped himself upright and climbed down to face me. He looked at me and I gestured that he could sit next to me. He nodded back in appreciation and did so, the bed springs creaking with accumulation to the new weight. "So what's up? Why did you stay silent all that time and didn't even say why?"

"I was...it's very childish actually." I admitted. The more I thought about what I did, the more sheepish I felt. I had a valid argument, but not a valid reason to behave the way I did. Not that I would admit it. Maybe I would tell Iceland, but not Japan and definitely not to that Germany. I don't trust them as much. Especially him.

"It's okay," Iceland rubbed my back with his right hand. "But you must've had a reason to do so. What is it?"

"Ah well, you see, Germany is the Third Reich's son." I started.

"We all knew that from the start. But go on."

"And when he died or got killed or whatever his lands were taken to be split up by the victors. My father got a piece of it too. That's just some backstory. My father; Britain; France and America all had guardianship rights over Germany, the boy, not the land, as well. Britain was too busy drinking tea and yelling at America, France was too busy baking, reading and drinking wine, while America was a bit underage to actually care for someone. Naturally, my father

took this kid in. He didn't tell me, or any of my siblings about it. He just kept his mouth shut, got a place, registered him in a school and came to him to take care of him, while I had to run around the house, figuring out things like, "what to give Kazakhstan for his nettle rash?" or "what do I make for dinner that isn't what we had yesterday, but is cheap, versatile and enough to sustain nutrition as well as be enough to stretch till the next day?". He didn't have those problems, like what if father doesn't come home? What am I supposed to do? I got depressed sometimes, and nobody helped me. I asked my father where he was going once and I got a crisp slap across the face for it. Now I know why. How am I not supposed to be mad?"

"That...was a lot." Iceland looked awkwardly at me and pursed his lips tightly. We sat, looking at each other for a long time. I didn't break my silence and so didn't he. After a little while in this environment he hugged me tightly out of the blue. "I'm sorry for you. Must've been stressful."

"It was." I whispered. The burning in my throat started, but no tears came. I didn't cry, and I haven't done so since I left the Nest. I preferred to curse or howl instead, but this wasn't the best option now.

"I'm sorry. I thought it was something actually childish. It isn't though." Iceland said quietly. I frowned at him and moved away. I was trying to elicit a different reaction. Not sympathy and sadness but understanding, support and anger. "Do you want to talk to-,"

"No." I said curtly. "I'm not a talker. I don't like to express my feelings to strangers."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Pretty sure?"

"Yes."

"I'll still tell someone..."

"FINE." I sighed. "I am fine."

"Alright." He yawned and stood up. I huffed in reply and leaned back on the wall. I didn't wash the sheets on the bed before going to sleep yesterday, so I wasn't really worried about Iceland spreading more. What I definitely know that I'll be covered in eczema tomorrow. Too bad it isn't curable. "Góða nótt."

"Okay." I looked back at him and he closed the door to the restroom. I, on the other hand, undressed, and placed my clothing and ushanka on the nightstand, then crawled under the cold covers facing the wall, my back towards the small hallway. My intention was to sleep, but my thoughts circled in a hopeless cycle: treachery, Germany, father, my newfound information, Germany's father, me, and so on so forth. It seemed that no matter how I looked at the situation, I was the victim and Germany was the victor. I didn't want to look at it that way, but my mind raced too fast for my conscious to stop it. After a while, the little light in the restroom shut off, and Iceland crept in. He came close to me, and I desperately tried to keep my breathing slow and regular, as if I was sleeping.

"Hey," he whispered. "Oh, you're asleep. Okay." He kept on muttering, and I strained to listen to him, as he climbed up to his own bunk. A little later, his shuffling subsided and I knew that he fell asleep. Tomorrow, I vowed, would be a better day. With that thought I slipped into an unconscious state.

I awoke feeling like I hadn't slept eight hours. Throughout the night I was waking up and couldn't fall back asleep repeatedly. At about two in the morning I fell into a dead sleep. Now, at five o'clock, I feel like a brick. Iceland was still sleeping and I could see that it was still dark through the drawn curtains. I quickly dressed in the dark and washed my face, in the dark as well, since I didn't want to shock my eyes which have gotten used to and adjusted to the dark already. A note was plastered on the mirror and when I left the room to see what was on it, I sighed to find that Iceland wrote to

me that he was tired from yesterday and wouldn't join me. Typical, but not unexpected. I went down the two flights of stairs and ran out into the quiet courtyard. I belonged to Pine College, and though I've seen others, I felt that this on was much to my style. The courtyard was planted with pines instead of a plain square of grass I glimpsed in other colleges. The pines made the square secluded and many people who inhabited the college were shy or untalkative, so it was more of a safe haven from the bustle of people. I left through the heavy metal gates that obscured most of the courtyard. One more thing that was different was that Pine College had the thickest metal bars. Whether or not that did anything to protect it (I doubt it), but it certainly made some of the freshmen feel safer. Mainly me. I quickly ran through the campus silently, passing the lampposts which guided me through. I didn't go to the park like I did yesterday. I wasn't like my father; I liked variety. I turned the opposite direction of the park onto a different street. The early morning city was slow and lethargic, like it was also a night owl. Some people were setting up their stores, opening the barred entrances, rolling their food carts and the steady sound of the metro under my feet and the layers of asphalt, carving out its tunnels. I was running at a relatively low rate, and when I passed a museum, I spotted several other runners, one waved enthusiastically at me.

"Good day to you, runner of the morn!" He cried, and then promptly disappeared without letting me respond. I kind of wished I was back at home with Ukraine, watching the endless fields beyond the Apple tree, feeling the quiet wind, unbridled and unbowed. Here, the wind curls around the sharp concrete turns, and it makes it evil, nasty and mean, lighting evil naturedly at the passers as it takes his possessions and flicks them onto the street. I decided to turn around and retrace my steps to the campus. After being lost for a little while, I made it back to Pine, and found Iceland standing in the doorway, chewing on a bread rind.

"Hi." He said between chewing. "I brought you something to eat."

"Oh, thanks," I stepped inside the room, and saw that he had opened the balcony door to freshen the air. He came in after me, and went into the kitchenette, where a plate of something cold was waiting for me. "Salmon." I commented. "I've eaten it before."

"I eat it everyday," Iceland took out two forks and handed one to me. "Not like I have a choice."

"Now you do." I smiled. He looked thoughtful about that notion. Our kitchenette was made of polished pine wood and it smelled just like the forest. The walls were white which reflected the light poring in from the windows in the back. The table set against the wall fit only two to three people and it was intimate. I could see how one would have a hard time not running into their flatmate once in a while.

"Hopefully you like it," he said. "Because I didn't know anything else you liked."

"I like it." I told him. "It's just I've only ever had it once." He nodded in understanding. We ate the rest of the meal in silence, the only sound, chewing and clattering of the silverware. When we finished, I offered to wash the dishes and he gratefully accepted. As I washed them with the scalding hot water I was used to, my mind drifted back to Germany. What did he think of me? Hopefully, he was afraid, or at least thought of me as superior, not the opposite, because that was surely how I felt. In our class for English, I felt the superiority gradient shift towards him considerably, with me struggling to figure out the slight nuances of relative clauses and pronouns while he breezed through it. I believe, I don't know. He certainly seemed to be. Even in our engineering class, I felt like he could grasp anything, while I drowned in the monotony of the liberal arts subjects.

"Russia, aren't your hands burning?" Iceland tapped me into reality. I had finished the dishes a long time ago, and I was running my hands under the water. My hands were already a scarlet red, but now they were a light burgundy colour, almost purple and they had steam rising from them. I quickly turned off the water and dried my hands, which felt papery, fragile and dry.

"I was lost...in thought." I replied sheepishly. He shook his head and sighed, but he was smiling, so it wasn't serious.

"Oh, Russia, lost in thought." Iceland took his bag. "Geniuses are always awkward."

"You think I'm a genius?" I asked, incredulous. "Really?"

"Yeah, I do," he followed me through the door towards the stairwell. "You behave like a genius under cover."

"Ha ha." I said. "Like I'm that."

"You are." Iceland took both of my hands in his cold ones. It wasn't the "I love you" kind of feeling, it was a friendship kind of fondness. He rubbed the back of my hands and looked at me with his red eyes. "I mean, I think so."

"Thanks Iceland." I looked back at him. "You're a great friend."

"Hopefully, your best friend." I was searching for a hint of disappointment in his gaze, but it was full of warmth and happiness. Good. I didn't need a lover, just a friend. He parted his hands and automatically moved them to his bag.

"Now you are." I said. He smiled again and then waved goodbye as he headed off to his first class.

"See you in history!" He called, and then I heard the click of the gate and nothing more. I, myself, had to go to a music class. I was intrigued. I wasn't a musician, but the school wanted me to "explore the liberal arts", so I must. It was a long walk to the end of the campus, since my college was next to the science department, and the arts were near the south. As was the language classes, the music class was built in a sophisticated and antique style, the wooden finish looked way more intricate than the chairs, which were plain fold ups. For a school that only took the best and had an aura of prestige, I was disappointed. The professor came up to me and asked what instrument I play. I told him the violin or piano. He nodded and told me that I could do the violin today, and try the piano next class, to see which I preferred. I accepted, and was handed a Strad 101 violin. The tone was warm, but not colourful, and I was used to a sharper and whippier bow. This one was obviously a student violin, but I didn't mind. The while time I did so, the professor looked at me with interest, and asked if I was going to major in violin or music theory. To his utter dissatisfaction, I told him engineering, and muttered under his breath about

someone who was so burly playing a delicate violin. I didn't say a word back, but kept his sentence in my mind.

"Hi professor!" A student said cheerfully as he came in. "Buon giorno!"

"Hello Italy." Said the professor pleasantly. "Come sta?"

"I'm okay." Italy responded. He looked like some sort of tourist, with khaki Bermuda shorts and a white t-shirt with a brown stitching at the neck. He also wore a straw hat with a blue ribbon, and he sat next to me, to make small talk.

"Hi!" He plopped down disgracefully next to me. On his back was a case bigger than his torso. "I'm Italy. What's your name?"

"Russia." I said curtly. He stuck out his hand and shook mine enthusiastically.

"Are you a violinist?" He asked me, pointing at the Strad.

"Sort of." I frowned. "Can't play very well, but enough to save my life."

"Cool, I play the cello. I actually made it in thanks to it." He patted his case and unzipped it to reveal a polished cello made of light coloured wood.

"Maple?" I guessed. "They don't make instruments out of it though..."

"No, birch." He giggled. "It's just a darker birch tree. Very rare."

"I see." Was the last sentence I uttered when the professor silenced the chatter with a tap on his podium. I opened the sheet music that I was given the day before and half heartedly picked up my violin. As we played the first line, the horrible sound of everyone hitting the wrong notes made me have the urge to clap my hands over my ears and to run out screaming. Only after a couple of lectures, struggles and yelling did we get though the whole sheet. Sheet one. Of twenty. It took us about thirty minutes, and I felt like a prisoner of war waiting his turn to be interrogated. I quickly sketched a box

and marked the box with lines across it, shading in the time we had left till we could leave. At the last tenth, trouble started.

"Russia." The professor barked.

"Yes?" I asked, bolting upright. "Sir?"

"What could you say, do better, with your group of violins to make the sound richer?"

"Uh," I stammered. "Lower an octave?" A laugh from the violin section made me go red, and even Italy was sporting a suppressed grimace.

"No!" He yelled. "Highten the pitch and tone!"

"I meant that." I muttered through gritted teeth. Italy shot me an apologetic glance, and I glared at him back. The rest of the class was spent in a tense silence, word silence, not musical. As we packed up for the class, Italy waved to me good bye, obviously unfazed by my attitude. He slung the case's shoulder pads over one of his and said. "Ciao!"

"Bye." I said flatly. The professor approached me at that moment and I thought he was going to grind me with his stupid lectures and lessons. Instead, well, he still gave me a spiel, but he was soft and sympathetic, telling me that I shouldn't worry if I got answers wrong and its human, blah, blah, blah. What caught my attention was his last phrase.

"Mr. UK would like to speak to you right now. He said you are excused from the next two classes." With that, he signalled to follow. Did I have a choice? Dear listener, no. I did not. I became that prisoner, marching off to interrogation. What was going to happen to me was a totally different kompot.

Góða nótt - good night

Buon giorno - good day

Come sta - how are you

Ciao - Hi/bye

If anyone speaks Italian here, could I ask if "Come sta" is correct? Or should it be "Come stai?" (I was told that the latter is formal and the other is informal) I have also failed to write a shorter chapter, very sorry! It just comes out that way I guess.

Behind my Back

[image]

"You." The person next to me whispered. He looked older than me, but his eyes were wide with fear and anger. "Do you realize what your-,"

"Czechia, that is quite enough!" Professor Hungary suddenly materialised next to him and pushed him away from me. "We aren't going to pull false accusations on anyone."

"Yeah right!" Czechia growled. "He's the Nazi's son! There are no false accusations!" Czechia was shorter than me, but it looked as if he could break my spine cleanly in half. One of his eyes was obscured by a blue rotated triangle, but his grey eye that was in view had tiny storms in it, and it became darker by the second. He looked like he was itching for a fight, and he backed up deliberately slowly towards another seat next to a meek but calm looking female student who rubbed his back affectionately. She didn't look back at me, but after a few moments turned her attention back on the professor, who retreated back to his blackboard and wrote 'Pangaea' in big letters across it.

"Now. Pangaea." Hungary looked back at us. He was now in a different stance. His eyes were worried, rather than methodically calm, and his eyes flitted from me to Czechia. The latter already had calmed down, thanks to the girl next to him, and had one hand in his sweatshirt pocket and the other held a pen loosely, ready to take notes. "Okay. Now Pangaea was formed when the Earth..."

"I thought that you said everything is in the past." I heard the girl next to Czechia whisper.

"Sorry. I got ahead of myself." He hissed back. "Not that I'm

apologizing. He still deserves the shock."

"Czechia..." the girl sighed exasperated. "Whatever."

"What?" He scribbled notes hastily that Hungary wrote on the board. "Slovakia, don't pretend that HE didn't hurt you either...don't worry, I won't talk to him anymore. He looks kind of like a weakling turtle." He let out a quiet bark of laughter.

"Good." Slovakia sighed again. "I don't want you to get in anymore fights."

"Come on, Slovakia. This was my first fight. Not even fight. Just a confrontation!"

"Well, don't make anymore." Slovakia ended the conversation by raising her hand and asking to the facility. Czechia muttered something under his breath and then shot me a look of loathing. The rest of the class was silent, and the only sound was the shuffle of papers, scratching of pens and tapping of feet, as well as Professor Hungary's droning voice. Once or twice a whisper sounded from the back, but it wasn't about me, just mindless small talk. I still felt tense when we wrapped up the lesson and when I started to leave the class, one of the last, as usual, a face which I didn't want to see came in. Russia. Oh, great.

"H-hi." I managed to awkwardly smile at him. He stayed silent and passed me without registering what I said. Iceland appeared behind him and shrugged, pointing at Russia. They both sat down, staying silent. I quickly left the vicinity and dashed down the hall. That went on for the whole day and next day. I would try to keep myself isolated from everyone, not including Finland, to whom I would say everything was alright. The next evening, I opened the dorm door and Finland was sitting at a desk, with Estonia, working on something. Estonia was typing on a laptop and he kept shaking his head and muttering. Finland was writing on a paper and only noticed me when he handed it to his friend.

"Oh, hey Germany." He greeted me. "Sorry for this mess." He pointed to the stacks of papers on either side of him.

"Hi Germany!" Estonia said warmly. Though he smiled, he quickly turned it into a frown. "I heard something was up with you in some class. People were making references to your...your father." His voice faltered a little, but he kept it even and quiet for most of the time. It was clear he was on my side, but he wasn't going to defend my dad. He tapped his digital wristwatch unconsciously, which flashed the hands of the clock in a unique pattern. I sighed and sat down next to him. He bit his lip and I saw his hands jerking to hug me. Finally, he did, and I hugged him back.

"Yeah, they were kind of...you know...some were scared...others wanted to attack me upfront...I don't really blame them though," I wanted to cry, but for some reason, my eyes felt dry, and my voice was even. It didn't even break or quiver, nor did I feel like I had a salt ball in my throat. I just felt, oddly calm. Like geysers before they erupt. Finland watched this unfold the whole time and narrowed his blue eyes to slits. His mouth never betrayed his emotion, so I couldn't tell if he was just tired, angry or jealous. Probably, judging by his recent behaviour, a mix of boredom and awkwardness was what Finland was feeling. Not that I could tell. But he placidly took out a leaf of paper and handed it to Estonia with a low mutter. Estonia shook his head from side to side and then smiled. All the time, he didn't look down at the content of the paper. Instead, he handed it to me.

"I can't read something that isn't for me." He said, folding his arms against his chest. He was wearing a fluffy light purple almost lavender lilac sweater today, which seemed to clash with his usual vest and dress shirt attire.

"It was taped to the door," Finland explained as my mouth opened to ask that question. "It is probably from the man who sent it." He narrowed his eyes again, but this time, he didn't focus on me, but on a random object in the room. I desperately tried not to follow his gaze across the room, with success, I might add. "Are you going to read it?"

"Yes." I replied and opened the twofold of the paper. It wasn't a good letter, and it wasn't terribly bad either. A formal statement to talk about myself, from the 'school psychologist/physician'. Interesting. Not terrible. At least I wasn't in trouble for anything. If

it were me a month ago, when I was fresh from my foster home, I would've been terrified. Now, I felt okay, as if this man or woman (couldn't tell by the typing) could actually help me with my 'little' problem. "Should I go...now?"

"I mean, if he's there." Finland said casually. "I don't go out of my way to see this guy, he's pretty...I don't know...weird. Not in a bad way, but he's very, too, I don't know. I don't want to ruin your experience with my bad ones. Go see what he has to say. Sorry for intruding into your private space. You didn't have to read the letter aloud."

"That's okay." I backed out of the door and went down the darkening hallway. I heard Estonia quietly close the door and it became silent, save for another student who went down the stairs behind me. They disappeared from my view with a curt goodbye. The wind whistled in and around the buildings and lampposts, and it seemed like the dragons and gargoyles were alive and breathing as steam poured from their mouths, which were cooling vents in disguise. I walked down the path, not alone, since there were quite many other students on the path, but everyone talked in whispers and huddled together from the cold. I regretted not taking my jacket, since the cold wind cut through my shirt like a knife. Clutching my letter under my arm, I ran through the campus, down the red brick laden path that spiralled down to the main offices and a map of the campus. Not wanting to spend any time asking around, so I consulted the map. Thankfully, the physician office was close and in a secluded area, surrounded by greenery. Another gust of the wind pushed me to run towards the dense woodsy area. The office looked like a mix between a cottage and a modern art building. It was one story tall and the front was all glass, with a comfortable seating arrangement around it. On the back wall, a tree was painted over a light pink background. The rest of the building was made of wood and metal combination. The lights were on, and I assumed that he was there. I opened the door and was met by a really sharp smell of antiseptic and fresh sheets. The room was warm, and a circular desk rose from the grey carpeting. On the left, a white hall led to different doors. To the right, was an office door, tightly closed. Nothing else was in the room. On the ceiling, leaves and branches of a tree were painted on over the blue walls.

"Hello?" I asked as I approached the desk. A plain looking man sat at the desk, who sighed and was typing at a computer. He wore a blue dress shirt with a white tie and when he looked up, he clearly recognised me. I, unfortunately, didn't. His red face sported a white cross and his chocolate brown eyes wanted to say something that his mouth didn't.

"Um, we're actually closed now..." His voice was young, maybe younger than me. He stood up to face me and was about to leave when I gave him the paper in my hand. "Oh, um, well. I'll alert him then." There weren't any chairs to sit on, so I was left in the room with the antiseptic smell and the low and annoying hum of the vent. The more I listened to it, the more it became worse. I let my eyes travel around the room to find the source of the noise when the...not man, boy came back in and told me to go through the door on the right.

"Thank you." The boy nodded, and when I turned my back I could tell with my peripheral vision that he was dazed and a little jumpy when I said that. Why does everyone show their emotions behind my back? Even Finland does it. Why?

"Good evening." A smooth and deep voice sounded in my ears. I closed the door, and found myself in the pink room, except a man in a plain looking brown suit, almost like professor Hungary's. The two red low couches were made into two semi circles and the man beckoned me to sit down.

"Hello. Sorry for being late..." I started. He waved my excuse away. I suddenly got the feeling of being patronised.

"Germany...I definitely remember you." His voice was even the whole time, but his greenish brown eyes sparkled. It looked like his eyes were mirroring a piece of land subjected to a slash and burn with green fire.

"I'm sorry. I don't really remember you." I admitted, sitting down opposite to him. He uncrossed his legs and I was half expecting that he'd take out some sort of clipboard. He was a psychologist after all.

"I expected that," he said quietly. "And I usually am not a target for

favouritism...but you know...not all of your family is, well, bad." He ended on a note of uncertainty and I guessed he wanted me to be excited. To be honest, I had no idea what he was on about. I already knew my father was a bad person. You didn't have to lecture me about it. Everyone would whisper behind my back, acting as if I couldn't hear or see the problem. At least USSR didn't act as if I wanted to take over the world. Maybe that's the thing that I respected him for.

"And so?" I prompted as politely as I could. I didn't even know this man's name, and he seemed to know me from birth. My view of this man was strongly to the likes of Finland's.

"Germany. You might remember my name. Maybe if I say my name, you'll remember. I'm Dr. Austria, to the school, to you, I'd be called Uncle." I was silent for a moment. Yes. I remembered now. I think I was taking a trip down memory lane very far down. To when I was about five years old and I was sitting at a grubby base on the eastern front. Only instead of being a psychologist at a school, he was a Viennese quadrille expert. I recalled my father's angry voice shouting at Austria for letting me stay with him.

"I remember you." I said evenly, remembering how well and calmly this man could shoot out of a rifle.

"I have...regretted doing the things I have done. Yet, we have to move on. I assume some of your classmates have a hard time doing so."

"A lot of them, actually."

"I have noticed. One of them came to me. I talk with him regularly. He told me that he is not angry at your past, but how you stole something from him. I assume it's not a possession, more like a memory." He sighed again. "I would tell you, but I don't want to breach privacy."

"I see."

"I paid physically and emotionally to repair my state." Austria continued. "But it seems some have deeper scars than I. I hope my

little introduction was good for you. We don't have to act like family if you don't want to."

"I'll think about it." I said, rising. "I really will...Uncle Austria."

"Danke." He said in his Austrian dialect and saw me out of the office. At least, I found another piece of the puzzle.

Danke - Thank you

Sarcasm? I think not.

[image]

Why did I ignore Germany? Well, because I have every right to. Iceland and Japan have asked me about it, both shaking their heads and saying how unfair it was to him. This evening, a very nippy and windy night, Iceland had the brilliant idea of opening the balcony door to let the air in. I obviously agreed, and soon our room turned into an icebox. Iceland and I made a routine of not talking during a certain time parameter, and we both unconsciously agreed on it. I sat on the floor and leaned against the wall, reading a book that Finland gave me, and Iceland worked on his project for an elective. The wind was nicely swirling around me, and the book was interesting. I didn't think that I could find anything better than sleeping, but reading with the sounds of the wind and an occasional Icelandic swear was nice. Almost felt like home. Almost. Until someone crashed into our dorm room, completely uninvited.

"HELLO PEOPLE!" Japan suddenly materialised in our room, sending Iceland forty centimetres into the air. He helped in surprise, and I even though I was also a little shocked, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Japan! What in the world? Why are you here?!" He yelled.

"You guys are total snails. Are you seriously doing homework?" She flicked her ears. She had a pink glittery purse bag and was clothed very lightly, in a white skirt and light blue long sleeve shirt with some red Japanese characters. Her cheeks were light pink and her hands looked raw. "Oh no, Russia. No. No. No. No reading books. Russia, really?"

"What?" I gave her a fake maniacal smile. "I am going to take over the world. Using books."

"Oh boys..." she sighed dramatically. "I came to ask you if you are going to go eat or not."

"We are." Iceland shut off his laptop and turned back to her. "I just wanted to finish, that's all. What are you doing here anyway? You're from a different college."

"Yep. I'm from Redwood. Yours is nicer though. Quieter." She jumped down to sit next to me, reading my book over my shoulder. "You can read that?"

"Some. It's kind of interesting." I snapped the book shut and stood up, placing it next to Iceland's laptop.

"I got here by accident. I meant to call you on the phone, but I walked here, someone was walking to the door, and I thought, hey, why not surprise those guys? I mean, it worked."

"Indeed it did." I leaned against the wall and looked at her. "So what did you want?"

"Want?" She raised her eyebrows with an accusing expression. "I want to go out. To eat. Remember?"

"Ah, yes. Food," I smiled at her as she gaped. "What we need."

"Yes, we can go. I have no more inspiration." Iceland already was outside the room.

"Wow you guys!" Japan was looking at our closets and messily made beds. "You all are real slobs."

"I know. I'm a bit lazy too." I admitted. "My father isn't here to yell at me."

"Well, you're saving his voice," she commented, skipping out of the room to join Iceland. "He's not yelling at you anymore." We went down the hall to the entrance of our college in silence, and Japan decided to stick next to me as the wind blew. I offered her my jacket when she started to press against my ribs from the cold. She thanked me with a little nod and she hid her head under the hood. The little roads were actually full of other students, chatting and going around in their little groups. Nobody minded the sharp winds and how all the statues had steam running out of their mouths like live beings. I began to understand the eccentric structure of Britain,

with his colleges named after tree types and the heating and cooling vents attached to the mouths of the sculptures. One effigy looked very real, and Iceland mistook it for a person.

"This place is super weird." Iceland muttered as we left the statuette. "I honestly thought it was real..." Japan tugged on my sleeve to hurry up and we had to pick up the pace to enter the hall. As soon as we entered the hall, she tugged off the jacket with relief and gave it back to me. The Hall was almost empty, to my relief and Japan's disappointment. We sat down at a table near the windows on the east side, away from the general group on the west wing.

"So Iceland," Japan started when we almost finished our dinner. I was raised to not speak before you finished eating, so my mouth was shut. "What are you here for? Major, I mean."

"Didn't I tell you already?" He asked. She shook her head and he sighed. "Well...as I said, I'm to be working with my sister on her ship. Fishing, you know."

"Why did you come here then, if you're going to fish?" She cocked her head questionably. "You don't need a degree for that. I fish with my mom and dad. They seem to do it without a prized degree."

"Are you accusing me, Japan?" Even though it sounded like a threat, his voice was even, and friendly.

"Oh, no no. I was just wondering...so much work...to just waste it all." She turned back to her Japanese dish and ate for some time. The group on the west was getting louder, and it felt like we were in a full hall. Then I realised that there was a familiar face in the group. Oh, America. The clown. I should have known. The loudmouth teenager that liked to stir the pot of trouble for everyone. My father would have loved to twist his arm. Maybe not only that. He couldn't say anything too violent in front of Kazakhstan. I would've. Especially for special cases like that. Both Japan and Iceland didn't know of my hate of America. I wasn't going to tell them unless the drastic measures came. Like if he came here. Japan was talking quietly to Iceland, telling him about Japanese fish and stuff like that.

"So..you eat it raw?" Iceland questioned her.

"Only sometimes. I wouldn't want to get sick from eating too much." Her sentence was cut short. She and Iceland were staring at something next to me. Even before I turned my head, the smell of something fried, greasy and disgusting hit my nose. When I finally did so, I was face to face with the Burger King. Yes, The United States. Great.

"Hya!" He waved to me and my friends in an exuberant way. "Mind if I sit here?"

"No!" "Yes!" Both me and Japan said the words at the same time. I guessed he cared for her words rather than mine, because he plopped himself right next to me with his tray of garbage.

"So...y'all new?" He asked with his mouth full of food. I couldn't help but scowl in disgust.

"Yes." Iceland replied evenly. By his tone, I couldn't guess wether or not he liked America.

"Mhmm." Japan nodded eagerly.

"You?" He pointed at me with his ketchup tipped fingers.

"Yes." I said through gritted teeth. I was bigger than him and way stronger. I could've put him in a headlock in a minute. Thirty seconds if he was eating. But I wasn't in it to be expelled for attempting to kill the headmaster's baby. So I had to play along. Yay.

"Cool." He said between eating. "What's the major?"

"Excuse me?" I asked, sarcasm hinting in my voice.

"I like you, dude." He nodded, taking off his stupid sunglasses, which he wore even in the dim light. How dumb can this guy get? "We should hang out."

"Sure." He probably bounced off my scoffing that leaked out of me like an oil tanker. He thought that I was really saying 'sure' as if I

meant it. I should start to pray more.

"Of course you can, America! We'd love your company!" Japan's eyes were two huge jewels sparkling in the light. She smiled from ear tip to ear tip and wanted to get closer to the American. Iceland was still picking at his fish salad and kept quiet. Good choice.

"Awesome! Love you guys already." He slid his arm around my shoulders and I had the urge to smack his arm away. At least his fingers were clean now. With my luck, he licked the sauce off. Repulsive. "Especially you. You're a quiet guy, you know." Didn't he see the steam rising out of my ears? I was quiet because I would yell at him if I opened my jaw.

"Russia's a quiet person." Iceland interjected. "He isn't one for crowds."

"Really? You're Russia?" He asked me. "I know your dad. How can you like the quiet if your dad yells every three seconds?" Now he was insulting my father. Sick. I couldn't even respond.

"Yes. I'm Russia." Was the reply that came out. I think if I were on the outside, my voice would sound shy and submissive. "And my father doesn't yell all the time. He is just tight."

"You kind of look tight too." He commented lightly. "You Russians need to relax! Can't you do that?"

"Maybe." I said. He laughed loudly next to my ear, and his guffaw reverberated in my skull. I never said that the man wasn't weak. He sure was a powerful influencer and liked to be in the centre of attention and take the hit for himself. I guess, after seeing Japan's hysterically happy face, I couldn't tell him to go sit in a pond and grow roots. I had to become his...friend.

"You are totally my league. Funny too." He turned to Iceland. "You his friend?"

"Mhmm." He nodded, but didn't engage in conversation. America finally stood up, and I saw that he stretched his arm out for me to shake. With some effort, I pulled my hand away from the table top

and shook it. His hand was soft and warm, as expected, and mine in comparison seemed like I worked on a field for most of my life. Even though his expression changed slightly, he didn't speak. He nodded to Iceland politely and waved to Japan. Once he left with his group, we were the only ones left.

"Did you see how I interested he was?" Japan was over the top in excitement. "Oh my gosh!"

"He seems...fine. Wouldn't hang out with him alone. But maybe in a group." Iceland offered to take our plates to the nearest receptacle. "You guys are my friends, so if you go, I go."

"I, personally hate him." I said, rather stubbornly.

"Why?" Japan asked, surprised.

"I respect your opinion. He's not likable," Iceland agreed, then he looked at Japan's face. "But he's not...er...bad, either. Honestly Japan. I can't say anything good or bad."

"Isn't he..." she trailed off.

"Hot?" Iceland said for her. Him and I laughed. "Is he?"

"Boiling." I rolled my eyes. The staff was already hinting that the hall was closed for the night, and though they couldn't kick us out, they still were very annoyed that we were still there. Japan tugged my jacket out of my grip and pulled it on instead of over herself this time.

"He seemed interested in you, in particular." Iceland remarked as we mad your way to our dormitories. I made no comment, but that did get me thinking. Why me?

"Maybe he wanted to be your friend. Just friend."

"Maybe more than friend. He just sat next to you. Not us."

"Symmetry?"

"He seemed touchy, and...flirty..." Iceland smiled. I felt a cold that

wasn't the wind. I tugged the earflaps of my ushanka tighter along the sides of my face. "And interested."

"Is he interested in girls?" Japan asked worriedly. "Or is he...?"

"Watch your back Russia." Iceland warned with humour. "He might be on to you!"

"Ugh. Why me? Not you?" I whined.

"You're probably more interesting. Everyone expects me to be quiet. I'm tall and skinny. I'm also a Nordic. My family has a reputation for being quiet and shy and studious. You're new, and that's exotic."

"Can't he be interested in Japan?" I asked. Japan's ears perked up at the sound of her name. "It would be her dream come true."

"Some of Japan's dreams are going to crumble." Iceland said sadly. "Sorry, Japan. America likes Russia."

"Russia doesn't like America." I said as we approached Pine College. "I think that's clear."

"Suuure." Iceland said. "Your face says otherwise."

"Its cold," I told him defensively. Indeed, my face was heating up, but it was really because of the cold. I'm telling the truth. Really. "Alright?"

"Okay, okay." Iceland kept his mischievous smile. "We'll let you off the hook. But America won't. I promise to not antagonize you."

"Thank you."

"Also, can you have a nickname?" He asked. "Are you okay with that?"

"Of course." I nodded. Japan hugged me a goodbye and asked me if she could borrow my sweater till tomorrow. With all of the drama that I vowed not to get into, especially with a westerner, and the tiredness that was upon me, I just agreed with everything. The only thing that registered to me was: I'll play along, but only to an

extent.

Philosophy and Serendipity

[image]

"Don't tell me you're taking them seriously," Finland and I were sitting outside in the courtyard on a breezy Saturday afternoon. Estonia was watching a video of China's silkie chickens, and was cooing repeatedly at the screen. I got used to him milling around Finland, and while sometimes he acted a bit childish, he was smart and caring. Today I voiced my problem with Czechia, who would glare and whisper every class, spreading lies and fear throughout the school. And while I understood his own fear and his trauma, he had no right to pin the fault on me. To make things worse, Russia plainly ignored me for the last two engineering classes, even when I asked for help. Japan would shrug apologetically and explained that he was 'in a mood'. I finally gathered the courage to tell Finland the whole story, two weeks later. "Because they are just ignorant."

"Oh Germany." Estonia sighed taking out his earphones. "Social problems arise because of either jealousy, fear or lack of attention. I think this person has all three. Explain to the professor and he might be able to assist this...I forgot his name." Today he was wearing a light grey sweatshirt with the school icon printed on the front. It seemed old and worn, and Estonia had no problem lying on the grass in it.

"Maybe..." I trailed off.

"Does China ever sell his chickens?" Finland asked his friend. "If you like them so much, you could just get one."

"Aren't they just the cutest things?" Estonia motioned to his phone screen. Two balls of buff coloured fluff were moving about on it. They were, if fact, pretty cute. "I can put them on your balcony."

"My balcony?" Finland said, half amused. "The one with the white carpet? Are we talking about the same balcony?" His words made Estonia laugh and he hugged the latter. "Only if you want."

"I'll think about it. We still have school and everything, so the chickens can wait. China has a lot of them anyway." He turned to me and asked if I liked chickens. Since I didn't have an opinion, I just shrugged and said maybe. I had the idea that Finland wasn't a person to get up and do something on a weekend. He was slow but methodical and calm and always looked like he knew what he was doing. Like now, he seemed to do exactly what he wants. Sometimes that was good, sometimes very bad.

"Are we boring you Germany?" Estonia asked, now lying on the ground on his stomach again. "I mean, truthfully. Wouldn't you rather be with your own group?"

"Um..."

"Like, I remember that I thought the fourth years were boring, almost graduate students. Our group was a bunch or dreamy and excited people. Some of them are still our group."

"Let him say something, Est." Finland tapped the top of his head to make him stop. "Go ahead, Germany."

"I don't actually have...that." I admitted.

"What about Iceland and Russia, and that girl...Japan." Estonia asked.

"Japan and Iceland are part of Russia's group," I explained. "They won't be my friends unless Russia is."

"Ah, so Russia is the problem, huh?" Finland's mouth twitched into a frown. "He's not one to be mean without a reason. I met him before the term started."

"Yeah! He's very shy and quiet. He wouldn't just do anything without a reason." Estonia looked up at me. "He's my brother. All my siblings are sort of off in that way. We all have our...issues."

"Do you want us to talk to him?" Finland asked. He stood up from the chair he was sitting in and yawned, looking around the courtyard as if he was searching for something. "Or you're the type to deal with it on your own?"

"I don't know," I said as Estonia picked himself off the ground as well and groaned, since his phone fell out of his hand. "I don't really have the courage to come up to him. On the other hand, he might be mad that you came instead of me..."

"You have time." Finland smiled and looked at his watch. "I mean, really. When I met him, I got the feeling he didn't hold grudges. He's probably sarcastic though."

"How would you know?" Estonia put his hands on his hips.

"His father is," the latter gestured to his friend. "You don't only inherit looks."

"Whatever Finland," Estonia pushed him lightly. "Germany, in all seriousness I can muster, we can talk to Iceland, who can to Russia, that way, you all can meet somewhere...and figure the problem out."

"Win-win." Finland agreed. "I feel like I've grown lichen. Let's walk somewhere."

"Okay," Estonia looked back at me with his innocent looking eyes. "Do you want to come?"

"I'll go. I guess."

"You don't have to!" Estonia's eyes widened, as if I had asked to jump off a cliff face. "Not if you don't want to."

"But I do." I answered evenly. Finland gently steered Estonia from me and we left the college courtyard.

"Est, he wants to, he wants to," Finland had the uncanny ability to convince his peers with his cool demeanour and agreeable character. "Don't pressure him."

"Okay, okay." Estonia took Finland's hand and they walked side by side, while I stayed behind, preferring to listen in rather than speak. Their talk was not the mindless chatter that you would expect from a Saturday afternoon almost graduate student who would want to do anything but talk about academia.

"Did you see Bosnia's project?" Estonia asked, clearly not to me. Finland said it would be nice to walk around to the northern side of the city and the outskirts. He promised to show me some monuments carved out of stone from years ago out in the open fields of Britain's vast isle. Today was a perfect time to do so, since the rare sunny and windy day was something of a phenomenon around the misty island.

"Yes. I'm actually a peer reviewer." Finland sighed and let his friend hook his hand in the crook of his arm. "Peer review is the worst. It's nit picking."

"I think it's great," Estonia argued. "I mean, how can we get better if nobody revises our papers? Won't they be all horrible then?"

"If they review like I do, then they are already horrible," Finland laughed at Estonia's shocked face. "I broke the system. Always let them pass."

"Fin. You are just lazy," the latter looked up. "That's all."

"You cannot call a theoretical mathematician lazy."

"Oh yes you can. Your whole department is. Just look at Professor Greece, she's just setting the prime example."

"I just think she has an appetite. She probably doesn't eat at home."

"Lazy to cook then."

"Aren't we all." Finland ended the conversation by gesturing to the Sky Hall, at the top of the campus. "Hey Germany, did you go to that man yet....Doctor...Austria...I think."

"Fin, you don't even know his name."

"Yes I do. He lectured my class on 'proper mental health care'." Finland made air quotes with his hands. "I'll bet he has great mental health. He drives a Renault. What does Theoretical Calculus have to do with what my favourite colour is?"

"Let's not go into this theory of cars again." Estonia shook his head.

"I did. He is actually my-," I cut myself off, but it seemed as if Finland read my mind and knew what I thought. I avoided eye contact and only looked back at him when he chuckled.

"Family?" He asked. When I nodded, he did so back and pulled his karvahattu down lower over his head. "I sensed the accents." We left the relatively busy campus and walked along a deserted street, first paved, then cobbled and then dirt. It seemed to go on and on, and led to the edge of the Earth. As the condition of the road decreased so did its size, soon about an hour of silence, with every one of us deep in our own thoughts, the road became too narrow, and only accommodated a person. We silently fell into an order, with Estonia in front and Finland in back. Estonia kept his head high and kept looking out on the horizon, on the gradually setting sun. It was about seventeen o'clock when we reached the edge. To me, it looked like the cliff face of the world. The water went on forever past our tiny peninsula and put to the beyond.

"Life goes on. War and peace and misery and happiness. No matter how much we shed our blood or rip out roots or blast away the very foundation, life will go on. Just like energy. You cannot destroy it or create it. It passes from a form to a form. Extinguishing one candle to light another." Finland pulled his hat off his head and held it limply in his hand. "The sun will make its journey across the world, then it will come back, as it has done for years, decades, centuries, eras and eons. The little squabbles over made up laws and regulations that have given people power and structure, to keep them away from becoming lawless murderers turn people fickle and make them obsessed over a blind and deaf cause that usually ends up in ruins. We are made of people, people who feel as though we are their support and happiness. People can flow in and out, sometimes forming their own groups, sometimes migrating to others. But as long as one person has faith, we exist and so does our legacy. We don't always die...we just...fade away..." his voice became rough at the end, and he ended his speech by sitting on the edge of the cliff, like the edge of eternity.

"What caused such a philosophical speech?" Estonia asked after moments of silence passed between us.

"I was making it in my head. Then it tumbled out." Finland smiled

in my direction. "You must get used to some philosophical thoughts by me. I do them sometimes. Nowadays, quite often, especially when we are in a dramatic almost dream like place and time, such as this. A Saturday evening, on the coast of the world. The border between the wild and the tame." The winds tugged at his white sleeves. "I'm not a philosopher, but I like to make those speeches. No one listens, though."

"I do." Estonia whispered quietly, hugging his friend close. It made me wonder if they were more than friends. Finland gestured for me to sit next to them and he wrapped a light arm around my shoulders as well, not as tight as Estonia, but still friendly. The waves were crashing heavily upon the the rocks and I felt some of the spray on my face. I tucked my glasses into my shirt pocket so as they wouldn't get spattered with seawater.

"I kind of wonder if anyone thinks about how many things are just...made up?" Estonia traced the air, spelling out words in the wind, known only to him. "Like society and law. That's made up. As well as standards and esteem. Popularity and fame. Stocks and paper bills. They can become useless in a matter of seconds when someone realises, wait, am I fighting for a piece of rag? Betting on a line on a screen? Why do I dress this way, even if it is uncomfortable and expensive, but I wear it to be like this person. Why do I have to lower myself to make someone else higher?" His deep blue azure eyes had a quiet understanding about them when he said those words. The sun had started to set and became a ball of fire, sinking into the ocean, making the blue turn purple, pink and orange. Whoever said sunsets were romantic are quite wrong, I feel. Sunsets make me feel like the day is dying, and it symbolises time to rest, retire and to turn down for the day, going from the buzzing exited state of the wake hours to a calmer mood of the night. I always liked the nights. They are a time of peace, calmness and reflection. Both my father and USSR would look and behave calmer when the sun set, as if it took their fire and passion and anger with it.

"Do you have a breakthrough heart rendering speech for us, Germany?" Finland asked quietly. "Seems like a nice time to do so. I did, Estonia did. Do you have something to lift off your chest?"

"Maybe." I started, stretching my neck to look up above, then slowly looking out on the ocean once more. "I was just thinking of the sunset. How wrong people are when they think it is the embodiment of romantic fiery passion. I think it's more of a deeper symbol. A time to leave the worry of the day, and to let the quiet unconscious free. After all, it is softer and kinder than ourselves, our conscious mind. I think, some people are hardened by the 'Made World'. But the Made World shapes who we are, and let's us be defined how we want. Unfortunately, we almost always take a road already built for us, and we all walk on it, till it transforms from a single, narrow and wild dirt path, to a wide, tamed and paved road. Maybe, just maybe the world would be different if everyone chose their own path without any intervention...or maybe not. I wouldn't know." After I finished, the two gave me an applause and nodded in agreement. By the time I finished, the sun had set, and Finland turned on his cell phone flashlight to guide us back to the city. I felt almost relieved, and a little more confident in that I could go up to Russia and ask him what made him angry. Maybe it was just the day, and just like his father and mine, he's gripped in the flames of the sun, overwhelmed by emotion. Maybe the night gives him reasoning, serendipity and clear sight. After all, the darkness erased all borders.

An Apology and a Friend

[image]

A weekend day. A windy Saturday morning met me outside. Today I was standing alone, outside and tired. I started to run from the gate of the college and I decided to run around the perimeter of the whole university. Not an easy feat, but attainable. I quickly tied the long laces of my black tennis shoes, took off my grey sports jacket, and felt the wind cut into my thin white t-shirt. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I put on some music through my earphones. Not many people were out this early on a weekend, and when I did meet a passerby student or professor, they would ask me in humour if I was crazy, committed or both. I would smile and wave in reply, since I had no breath left in me to speak. I made a careful route to avoid the usually busy places to not meet many people. After meeting the lunatic America last night, I wanted to cross less paths with that kind of crowd, and our group agreed to wake early, dine early and to do everything promptly, rather than hanging back. One drawback to this plan was that he was in one of my classes, I've remembered. Whatever.

"HEY RUSSIA!" I heard someone holler in an annoying tone. I could hear the voice through t he earphones. Without even turning around, the little hairs on my back stood on end, and my lips formed a snarl. Him. Did he read minds now? "HELLO?!" Without responding, I sprinted towards a tall building with a lengthy shadow and ducked behind it. Soon enough, I saw the plump form run, or lightly jog toward my hiding spot. I realised I shouldn't be so scared, since I was more angry than afraid, but his behaviour last night was utterly ghastly, and use didn't want it to repeat. There, I used Mr. UK's word of the day. Ghastly.

"I know you're here somewhere!" America kept yelling. "Come on, I just want to ask a question. A tiny one! I promise!"

"Fine." I stalked out from behind him and he smiled at me with a stupid sincerity. "What do you want?" I pulled the earphone cord

out of my ears and turned off the music.

"I just wanted to say..." he looked up at me with round eyes, to elicit some sympathy. The chances are as small as his BMI in the negative. "That I'm sorry. For making you uncomfortable yesterday. I was very dumb of me to do that." I have to admit, I was surprised by his apology. I wasn't very convinced in the truthfulness of his expression of regret, but he apologized. That's progress. He was apparently waiting for me to accept, and was clutching the hem of his navy blue shirt. I noticed he didn't have his sunglasses on his face, but tucked on his shirt collar. He tried to remain carefree but I saw that his jaw was clenched and he was trying to smile casually, but came out nervously. He stuck out his hand, waiting for me to accept his handshake.

"Er..okay." I took his hand and shook it briefly, feeling that his arm was floppy and he preferred me to lead.

"I'm just...I don't know, a bit over excited, and well...yeah....sorry." he rubbed his exposed arms, shielding them from the wind. I heard the distinct bongs of the clock in the distance. It was a habit of mine to freeze up and listen to how many strikes sounded before going on to the day. "I have a sort of feeling...like I have to get close to people, and it might've come across as weird...but I was just hoping you might be...my friend?"

"I had the feeling you wanted to be... never mind." I muttered and cursed under my breath.

"No!" America looked shocked at my response. His eyes widened and he held his arms out, shaking his hands. "I'm not like that. I'm gay, yes, but I don't force people to be with me. It's a choice. Don't think I'm that pushy."

"Well, I guess that's all right then." I said and received a smiled from him. I had to admit, once he told me that, I felt a bit better. After all, friendship was something I could do work on. And it wasn't me who'd approached him, it was his own choice.

"Thanks," America beamed with his flashy white teeth. "For accepting. And again, sorry."

"That's fine," I put my jacket on, since standing in the wind with sweat on my back was a recipe for pneumonia.

"Are you going back already?" America asked me as I turned to start running again.

"Yes."

"Can I come with you?"

"Do you mean, may you come with me?" I laughed at his rapid change of expression, from hopefulness to annoyance. "Just trying to improve your English."

"Ha ha, I'm always improving English," he stuffed his hands in his pockets as I gestured for him to follow. "I live with an English professor."

"Are you inspired to teach new generations of students in an antique shop style classroom, decked in a formal suit and top hat?"

"Sure. I mean, it's my dream job." He replied sarcastically. "I've always wanted to, 'fill the minds of future generations with knowledge and skills'."

"I could teach for you," I offered, a smile cracking my face.

"Ah yes, and everyone will be Communist, speak without articles and use super complicated language and formality."

"Well, isn't that what life is all about?" I asked, putting my earphones back in, but kept the volume lower than usual, to hear what America was saying. I didn't run this time, since I didn't know if the American could keep up. He stayed silent for some time, and then he asked a question that I was, again, surprised about.

"You know...I know your dad...and I was kind of wondering, is he like that to you?" He asked.

"Like what?"

"Mean. Angry. Frustrated." America listed the adjectives on his

fingers, counting till he had more descriptions than fingers.

"Is your father always drinking tea, behaving like a king and patronizing?" I asked sarcastically.

"Actually...yes, he is," he sighed. "He's always like that. To other people and to me. I was just wondering if your dad yells at you like he tells at meetings."

"No. He doesn't yell at us, much," America smiled at that."He always wants the best for us, and protects us. He's a very good father."

"That's nice,"

"But you have other good things," I commented. "Like money. I don't have that. You also live with your mother and have a whole family. You can afford to do anything. At least, I've always thought so."

"Well, yeah, I guess you're right," he nodded in agreement. "You can't have everything."

"What you can try," I suggested as we walked up to the college gates. "Is to be a bit nicer. I mean, obedient-er. You know?"

"Fat chance." He pointed at himself. "My chances are as slim as I am wide. Land of the free won't bow down to anyone, especially his tea guzzling dad."

"Suit yourself." I fished my keycard out of my pocket and slid it into the little slot on the handle.

"Pine College?" America said as we entered the quiet courtyard. "Cool."

"Which one are you in?"

"I'm in Cedar. Cedar College. Yours looks better, though."

"Almost everyone has said that."

"I guess it's true then." He chuckled. "Are you doing anything now?"

"Yes, I'm waking my flatmate and we are going to eat." We ascended the steps to the second floor, where my flat was located. America kept looking around and pointing out what was different, better or worse, than in his college. We then come up to my room and knock on the door. Almost immediately, Iceland opens the door and is shocked.

"What. Is. He. Doing. Here." He says each word fast, with long breaks in between. "I thought you said-,"

"He explained himself," I interrupted him with a flick of my wrist. "I listen when somebody has an explanation. I figured he'd be a good friend. He told me his intentions clearly."

"Okay. Yay for progress then," he smiled and came out. "Don't need anything?"

"Not as yet." I replied and we walked down and back, retracing our steps till we get to the dining hall. I guessed that it was too early for many students to have breakfast, and thankfully the hall was empty. Over the days and weeks, I figured out that students come in for breakfast at a generally later time on a weekend and earlier on a school day. Same with the other meals, excluding Fridays, which I've seen where like school day schedules in the morning till midday, then they switch to a weekend timetable. With the perfect timing, I was able to dine alone, or with Iceland and Japan, in peace and quiet. As much peace and quiet Japan let us have.

"Let's meet at the table to the right." Iceland suggested. After a few minutes, with me being the first to sit, he and America sat down as well. I murmured a little prayer of thanks and started to eat.

"So...Are you Christian or Muslim?" America asked after a few minutes. "I haven't seen people pray before food in a long time."

"I'm Orthodox. Yes, Christian. My grandfather took my beliefs under his control." I explained, anticipating the next question that was forming on his lips.

"Ah, I was going to say, your dad's atheist, right?"

"Yes." I answered curtly, though not coldly. "Its different, but manageable. We pretend not to notice his...absence of faith." I finished off awkwardly.

"I'm a protestant. Still Christian." America made the cross with his utensils. Iceland ate deliberately slowly and didn't engage in conversation. He kept smiling stupidly and every time I spoke to America, he would laugh into his food as if I was a stand-up comedian delivering a punchline.

"What Iceland?" I asked, annoyed.

"Oh, nothing, nothing." He kept smiling. Then he laughed so loudly that I almost jumped. "Okay, okay, Japan, that was hilarious."

"Ohaio!" Japan's hands were instantly on my shoulders and I couldn't help but tug them down.

"What were you doing?" I asked in fake seriousness.

"Making bunny ears. And acting out your conversation." She said, matter of fact. Without further ado, she sat next to me and started to pick out bits of fruit from my plate and eating them. "These are good. What are they?"

"Um, some fruit?" I replied. "Probably lychee. I don't know."

"How can you not know what you put on your plate?" Japan finally took the plate and started to eat everything off it. "Oh, these are good too. Caviar, I think they're called."

"Japan...I was still eating." I protested in vain, because as I said that, the rest of my buttered bread with red caviar disappeared into her mouth.

"Careful that you don't ingest Russia's spit." Iceland warned playfully. "You might turn into a super quiet, super careful engineer who speaks without articles."

"You all rib me about articles." I interjected. "When have I not spoken incorrectly, without using articles?"

"It's a stereotype, Rus." Japan shrugged. "I'm not saying that you do it. Your father does. So, we just thought you might too."

"Thank you for explaining and eating my breakfast." I slowly nodded.

"I can get you more," she offered. "Do you want anything, America?"

"Nope. I'm good." He replied. As Japan went off, Iceland leaned into the direction of the table to whisper to America.

"Japan likes you." He said quickly.

"Um, her?" He asked, pointing at Japan.

"Yes."

"Oof. Well...heh, funny. Well, you know, ah...not that I'm taken or anything...."

"Not interested?" He finished for America. "Shame. But don't worry, we won't tell, right Rus?"

"Hmm...only if you pay me a sum of money..." I laughed. "I'll keep quiet, I will."

"Our little secret." Iceland, America and I all shook on it. "The guys' secret."

"Definitely." I stopped when Japan came with the plate. One bread slice with butter and caviar looked back up at me.

"Black?" I said, pointing to it. "Fancy."

"Dude, don't you eat it with your grandad or something?" America asked me.

"No. My grandfather prefers to keep his treasures for himself. No sharing."

"My mom likes vintage wines." He started. "And cheeses. Part of the reason I don't go to many places is that either my mom wants a new

wine or my dad wants a new tea set. It's really petty."

"We travel, but in really cheap standards. I don't think many can survive like that." I told him.

"Economics, is definitely the key here." He laid back as much as a stool let him. Without a back, it was hard to do what he always did at meetings, laying back in two legs of a chair, while setting his feet on the table. "That's why I'm majoring in it."

"That's pretty boring." I commented. He made a face and then laughed.

"My guys in the group are all pretty cool. I love the teacher, Indonesia. He's just awesome."

"Do you have weird people?" Iceland asked. "Exclude yourself, please."

"Well, we do have this really, really quiet person named Germany...for managing economic trading, export and import, stocks and selling, you have to be loud. Basically opposite of this guy."

"Rus has a grudge on this guy," Iceland told him.

"Iceland!" I whipped my head around to silence him, but too late. That was a secret! He wasn't supposed to do say that. Not to anyone, not ever.

"You have a grudge...on Germany?" America raised his eyebrows accusingly. "Realy? He's so quiet! And kind of super shy. Not like you can even get in an argument with him."

"Well, I have a certain little fact that slipped out one time....that kind of ruined my whole childhood." I said.

"How?!"

"Well...it's a long story. I figured out that it wasn't entirely his fault...but I really don't have the courage to actually come up to him. He doesn't come up to me either, so whatever."

"Do you want to meet you guys up somewhere?" America asked me. "I can do it."

"I know you can." I sighed. "That worries me."

"He seems so lonely," Japan remarked. She was waiting patiently for America to finish his lavish breakfast. "It looks like he doesn't have any friends."

"See?" America exclaimed. "You should definitely let him into your group."

"Why am I always on the unpopular side?" I said dryly. Japan giggled and hugged my neck again.

"Aw, Rus, don't be so uptight. We'll still love you more than anyone else."

"Definitely." Iceland nodded.

"Totally." America smiled. "You're the leader here."

"Okay." I stood up and stretched. "But we will do it tomorrow. Not today, it's already too late for that."

"We'll hold you to that." America warned. "Meanwhile, what you need is an English lesson in contractions. And informality."

Russland

[image]

Sunday. Rainy. I was out on the balcony with Finland who was vaping, and didn't mind getting wet. He took off his hat and let the rain drip down his face and head.

"The rain," Finland growled. "I don't like it. It's so noisy. The snow smothers the land in quiet. Rain just makes it depressed and ugly."

"The island is very rainy." I pointed out. "Maybe when it becomes colder it will snow."

"Maybe..." he looked out onto the campus. From the third floor, it was a very nice view of the foggy landscape below. I could see the far end of the campus, where the arts and religious classes took place. I went back inside, leaving Finland outside, in the rain. He had left his big project over the table, and installed a whiteboard writing complicated equations and formulas all over it in black, red and green marker. I saw what I assumed was a Finnish swear was written all over a graded paper, and a laptop with an absurd amount of writing and tables was sitting upon this mess of his. "Sorry." He said as he came in, taking off his coat and drying his head with a towel. "It's my fourth year cumulative project. I haven't gotten much progress, but I try not to get mad. As you can see, that's why I was a bit hesitant to be with a first year, I thought the mess might be a bit weird."

"No, it's okay," I told him. "I understand. It must be a lot of work. And very hard."

"Not as hard as it is confusing and repetitive." He explained, erasing some of the equations in black and rewriting new mathematical

sigmas, standard deviation and integral functions. As I was pretty advanced in mathematics, I understood some of his writing, but he lost me at double integration, sigma notations and a theory called the Collatz Conjecture. "See, I know all of this, it's just writing it in 'layman terms' is hard."

"I don't think I can understand the Collatz Conjecture with layman's terms anyway." I admitted. He smiled, but didn't proceed to explain it. Instead, he shuffled his papers into rough plies, so at least the table could be seen.

"Are you hungry?" He asked.

"A little."

"Do you want to go down, or should I make something?" Finland had told me that he slowly migrated from eating in the dining hall to making his own food in the middle of second year. He said it was easier and more comfortable. Though I appreciated his cooking yesterday, my stomach disagreed. Finland's idea of a salad was three parts leaves, one part ketchup. The salad leaves were soaked in the paste when he finished making it, and his hands looked like he had murdered someone, not bothering to wash them. He eventually did, but I still didn't eat it. As if I had no choice, I nodded and said I'd have him cook. As long as there was no ketchup. He agreed and smiled at that. It was very hard to engage in conversation with my roommate, since our age, year, and interests were conflicting with one another. We spent most of the evenings in terse silence, either doing work or just awkwardly avoiding each other. Finland introduced me to Serbia, an old friend of his, who looked rough and liked to smoke actual cigarettes. Nor Finland nor Serbia told me what he did or what he majored in. They would talk about life in graduate school, rent, car ownership, study abroad and etcetera. Finland would include me in some conversation, ask my opinion once in a while, but I would just nod, say "yeah, uh huh" and go back to being the wallflower. Estonia suggested I go out by myself, without them, to make some friends without Finland "breathing down my neck" as he mentioned. The suggestion could go two ways, one for me, I could go out to create bonds, and for them, to be alone, without some quiet and nosy first year tailing their activities.

"You know, Germany," Finland was in the kitchen, making some sort of porridge. "You should do what Estonia said...maybe it'll be good for you. I'm just saying, you don't have to do it." Both Finland and Estonia were especially politically correct and polite when wanting usher me out. Maybe I was just used to "raus" or "пошел отсюда" followed by a quick flick of the wrist or a curse.

"Where should I start?" I asked when he invited me to eat. Mämmi, it was called, looked back up at me from the light wood table. I mean, I have Italy, but we mostly texted on a messenger app, and he was starting to move on and out. Our conversations were spanning over days, just talking about homework and superficial issues. I would see him around, but after a quick greeting, he would disappear. I asked him about it, and he apologized, with the amount of classes and his struggles in certain subjects, he told me that he was being tutored

"Go out. Find people. I would start by sitting down randomly in the dining hall."

"Ah, that's really hard." I countered. "And scary. How did you find Estonia?"

"Estonia...we crossed paths many times. His father tried to take over my lands, he was in most of my classes in first and second year, and he was my flatmate third year. But we officially became friends in an embarrassing situation that I do not wish to disclose."

"Really?"

"Shouldn't have said that." He laughed. "Estonia might tell you, I won't. But you have a better situation to foster friendship."

"So I should start like you said...randomly?"

"Yeah, definitely." Finland finished his meal and stared directly at me with full seriousness. "Tell the truth, don't you think we're boring?"

"Well, a little." I half smiled. "Sometimes it's boring, sometimes interesting."

"So you'll try today?" He said, as if I had made up my mind already. "Right?"

"Okay..." he wasn't going to let down, I guessed. Well, we'll have to try.

Sunday evening. Night. Not rainy. And I was worried and full of doubtful thoughts. Standing outside the dining hall, holding up groups of people, and behaving like a mute person was not helping my chances or self esteem.

"Can you move?" Someone hissed in my ear and pushed me out of the way to go in. I swallowed down anger and pushed through the door. I went down later than usual time, and though the sound was amplified by one hundred in the hall, there weren't many students milling about. I filled my plate deliberately slowly, but I still had to choose a spot. But where? I had so many choice. Next to the quiet group that was playing cards? They looked suspicious and shady though. Next to the pair who was laughing? They'd probably not want me.

"Hey! Germany!" I heard my name from the back of the hall. The silence as I walked down was embarrassing and scary, but when I sat down, the noise went back to the high level. I recognised everyone in the group. America, Japan, Iceland and...Russia. "Hi."

"Hello." I greeted everyone, and Japan scooted over to create a spot between her and Russia.

"Hey," Iceland waved.

"Welcome back." Japan hugged me.

"Good evening." Russia said passively, only after America poked him in the side. All of their faces were painted with an expression as if they knew something.

"How are you?" Japan asked me. She was eating a crustacean with her fingers, coating it in a light red sauce.

"I'm fine."

"Just fine?"

"Yeah,"

"Anything that we can do to make your day amazing?"

"Eh. I'm kind of bored. I don't have many friends," I explained. "Scratch that, I have no friends. Unless you count one of my childhood friends that I don't see often."

"Aww, that's awful," her ears dropped and her dark eyes widened. "But we can have you officially join our group, instead of just hanging around. America just joined yesterday. Now you can join as well."

"Thanks." I said with appreciation in my voice. The group still was looking at each other, shooting knowing looks to each other.

"You know Germany," Iceland told me. "We wanted to say something...well, Russia wanted to say something."

"Yes, he did." Japan agreed. America looked at Russia from the other side of the table, nodding.

"Thank you," Russia growled. "For putting me on the spot. But anyway, I was trying to contact you or something, to tell you that...I'm sorry. For judging you for outside factors that weren't in your control or even your choice. So...if you can somehow accept my apology, that would be great." He finished off with a mutter, but kept looking at me, waiting for my response. "I noticed that I don't think before I assume and act." I don't know why I didn't respond, but instead, somehow I overcame my fear and hugged him. He jolted a bit, but then hugged me as well. "Is that an acceptance?" He whispered.

"Ja." I whispered back, and he broke the embrace.

"Yay!" Japan exclaimed. "You've made up again!"

"Somehow." Iceland nodded. "Welcome to our group, officially."

"What I did want to know," Russia stated once we settled down again. "Is why social interaction always has to be around a table. A food table, mind you."

"Because that's the only thing that's interesting." America talked in an animated fashion, using his hands and shoulders along with his speech. "Around here all we do is study. Like, last year, my friends and me, we had conversation only around dining. What food do you like? What's your favourite restaurant? Stuff like that."

"Do you know how superficial and shallow that is?" Russia asked. "No talking about your interests or travels or ideas? Also, speaking of English, you have to say "my friends and I", not "me", that's bad grammar."

"No Rus, only you do that," Iceland laughed warmly. "Around here, the ice is pretty thin. We also know English pretty well. Enough not to be taught by a foreigner."

"I am good enough to be in Germany's class." He said my name. I was kind of shocking at first, like he regarded me as important to be uttering my name.

"Wow," America said in mock pity. "Germany, I hope you aren't being tortured there. Rus probably asks dumb and convoluted questions you've never heard of, like "how would you implement a conjecture in a passive sentence with a perfect participle?"

"Really?" Russia asked. "Do I exist to be mocked for my English questions? For your information, I don't even like the subject. If it were my choice, I'd говорил по русски." His voice was higher and warmer in Russian, and if his language ability was a palette of colour, his English would be black and white, while his Russian could be characterised as a rainbow.

"Didn't know what you said, but it sounded like you wanted to say you golf per risks." America took out his phone with an eye scorching multicoloured case and started to scroll through a chat. Russia face palmed and sighed at him.

"See? That is why I speak English, so everyone understands." Russia

replied, crossing his arms.

"Do y'all have phones?" America asked, changing subject like Russia changed his moods. "Dumb question. I meant, can I give everyone my number. We can make a group chat."

"Sure, my number is +81 33 456 7769." Japan told him as soon as his question slipped out.

" +354 093 2278." Iceland wrote it down on a napkin.

"+7 22 46 74." Russia dictated. America gave me his phone to me so I could fill out a contact. He then checked it by making a chat and sending everyone a 'hi' with a smiley face.

"It works," Russia announced. He set his phone down on the table and stood up to go put his plate away. Japan snatched it from the table and started to try to unlock it. When he returned, he didn't even try to stop her, but merely smirked at her strained face. After she gave up with a groan, he easily punched in his passcode and handed it to her.

"You're giving me your phone?" She said.

"You so desperately want it." He replied simply. "I assure you, there is nothing for me to hide on it. Just don't go into my social media account."

"Rus, that's the first thing she'll do now." America shook his head. Russia smiled and shrugged, still looking at Japan's gleeful face. After a few minutes, her smile turned into a half grimace.

"Russia! Shame on you!" She squealed. "Social media isn't for THAT purpose."

"Are you posting inappropriate pictures online or something?" Iceland yawned.

"No. Even worse." Japan gasped dramatically. "He's selling services. Bilingual translation services, from Russian to German and Chinese. How could you sell yourself? And not even tell me? Especially that you could understand everything when I talked to China, who's my

family."

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Russia inhaled and held his breath, then exhaled loudly and slowly. "And, I wanted to hear how you spoke without external pressure."

"Sounds like a physics problem, Rus." Iceland started. Russia smiled in turn, as if waiting for Iceland's response. "You're-,"

"Bad at comparing, I know." He finished. "Is that my shtick now?"

"It could be."

"Indeed it could."

"So you can understand me," America pointed to himself then at everyone else in turn. "Iceland, in his language, Japan when she speaks in Chinese, and Germany, who...well, I haven't heard anyone around speak German yet. No wait. There's the German professor, never mind."

"Actually, I speak Icelandic. You mean Finnish." Iceland corrected.

"A little. As I said, not enough to engage in a political conversation." Russia took his phone from Japan's hands. "And I take German as a class here."

"Who teaches it?" I was surprised at my own bravery to speak up.

"Some old guy." Russia said, without looking at me. "His name is, German Empire. He says "Kinder nennen mich 'Professor GE' as if that's easier." I just call him Herr German Empire. It seems to tick him off. But I do that." The name clicked in my head like two halves of the puzzle. My grandfather taught here? Can anything be more insane? Surely not. I wanted to ask more, but Russia was on a different subject altogether already. Maybe he accepted me into his group, but it's a long way down to achieve trust. A way filled with concrete, ice, anger, suspicion and sarcasm. Oh, an a lot of Russian swears.

говорил по русски - (conditional phrase) [I] would have talked in Russian (in this context) / [I] spoke in Russian.

If anyone speaks German fluently, please tell me if I have the word order correctly for the sentence "Kinder, nennen mich 'Professor GE'". I have a feeling that it is incorrect. If it is, I will correct it.

The Leaf and the Stone

[image]

As the colder months set in, I had to either move faster or wear more clothing in the mornings. I felt my throat get scratchy and my sinuses started to get clogged from the November wind and ice. Not anything major, but I didn't want to try my luck. Just to be safe. I also heard the physician on site was a crazy man who liked to collect hybrid and crossed breeds of finches with rare abnormalities. Today, an unusually bright sky greeted everyone who came out, mocking and teasing at the fact that it was a Monday and we would have to be stuck in a classroom. Without any special conversation, I bid Iceland a farewell until the afternoon and set off to my English class. I had studied the material yesterday most of the evening, and was fully prepared for a stress-free lesson. I had arrived earlier than anyone else and as it seemed, so did Mr. UK. After a terse hello, we were submerged in an awkward silence, till he cleared his throat. Today, he was wearing a red dress shirt under a black vest. His ever present cane was propped on the podium. His teacup which usually disappeared by the start of class was sitting on one of the student desks. I sat down next to his cup, and peered into it while he wasn't looking. Darjeeling, with lemon and speckles of chocolate drizzle. As he turned to me, I quickly snapped my head up and back to make it look like I was not just smelling the stuff in his cup.

"So, lad, how do you like it here?" He asked me, while writing the date on the blackboard. The chalk on the blackboard made me want to curl my shoulders over my ears.

"It's fine, sir," I responded without much emotion. "Some classes are nice. Others are not."

"As in all schools." He smiled. "But I do hope you are enjoying this class?"

"Of course, sir." My honest answer would be no. But you can't go around insulting your teacher and headmaster, so lying for a good cause was appropriate. He looked at me once more with his bronze gaze, which could even be called a "tea colour", and just merely nodded.

"That is good." He commented. "What other language do you take? Or speak, maybe?"

"I am currently taking German." I explained. "But I speak Russian, Chinese and Finnish, a little."

"Very interesting, are you exposed to many languages at home?"

"My father knows Esperanto. But he frequently converses with Mr. China, so I kind of learned Chinese at an early age. I was just interested in Finnish, so I can understand and speak in it."

"How charming." Mr. UK finished his sentence early once more people started to file in. "It was nice to get to know you a little more, Russia." Mr. UK didn't like to talk on personal notes when many people were around.

"Of course, sir." I opened the English textbook that we were using and started to read the paragraph on the page. The last bell rung, and I finally looked up to face our professor. Not before I realised that someone was sitting next to me.

"Hallo!" He chirped. Oh, it was Germany. He looked very happy and lively this morning. He was even courageous enough to say something first.

"Hey." I said back lamely. His enthusiasm seemed to deflate a little bit, and his smile turned quickly into a frown. After a few moments, he pursed his lips tightly together and looked away. Only after he did that, I found that my teeth were showing and I probably looked

very offended and defensive. "Er, sorry. I didn't mean to be so sullen. I was just a little surprised."

"Oh, that's okay." He faced me, but kept his eyes down. "I'll try to be less surprising next time."

"Sounds like a plan." I ended the conversation as soon as Mr. UK cleared his throat in an animated fashion to get our attention.

"Good morning everyone!" He announced, stepping up on his podium and shifting some papers around before continuing. "Today, I would like to try something different." Several people groaned in the back and Mr. UK asked why.

"Because when we do something different with you, Mr. UK, it always ends up bad." A girl named Brunei piped up. Many students around her laughed at the comment, and her yellow face flushed from embarrassment. But the English professor took things in stride and just chuckled at the statement.

"It may have been disastrous in last year's class, Brunei. But I assure you, today I plan to divide you into pairs to work on some literature together." Everyone automatically looked around the room not mentally pick a partner. I locked gazes with Croatia and he mouthed 'partner' at me. But Mr. UK had other plans. He clapped his hands once again to calm the class down. "To make it fair, we will do this. Turn to the left and that is your partner, unless that person is taken, that is your group. Everyone ready?" After the initial confusion in the back, I slowly turned my head to see Germany waiting expectantly, pointing at the page we were supposed to be on.

"I guess we're partners then." I said. Mr. UK wrote instructions on the board for us to follow. We would openly discuss these questions next class.

"Yeah," he responded and took out a pen and highlighter. "I like to mark up text. It helps to organise everything. So...should we read alone and then answer the questions or...?"

"We can read on our own first." I opened the page up to the account

we were supposedly discussing. "Then share the...um, annotations." I read the words from the board. After reading the dull story, I felt no inspiration to continue. Discuss this? How can I describe what a character is feeling when he sees a leaf fall on his path. Or what can I infer when he drops a stone into the water and sees ripples. I used to do that with Ukraine and Belarus, and I felt no special emotion.

"So, what are your thoughts?" I asked Germany once he looked up at me after highlighting.

"I think it is a very meaningful work." He said, straightening his glasses. "Especially when he sees the leaf fall in his path. That symbolises something wrong in his life that needs to change or renew and he is stalling on it. The fact that he waits for it to fall also has a significance on his actions in his domestic life."

"Great." I nodded.

"The stone in the water also has deep symbology. When he drops the stone, he does so in a half hearted manner. He says 'I threw the stone limply, and it soared through the air heavily, until it landed with a small splash at the end of the pond.' It means that he is committing actions against his family in a way without malice, and he seems to think it must be that way, and there is no way to escape the consequences. The amount of ripples he counts is the number of people in his family he is going to betray and affect. The nuances here are very easy to catch with the slight phrasing and captivating imagery. What are your notes and thoughts on the scenes?" Huh? What? He sped so fast through that explanation that I didn't even blink. How could he turn those dumb and boring scenes of everyday life into some philosophical and theological idea? My mind drew a blank when he asked me the question.

"Pardon?" I managed to say, smiling stupidly.

"I wanted to ask you your thoughts and notes on the sceneries and what the character thought at this time based on the background we have?" To be honest, Germany, I've never met such a nerdy person in my life. How am I supposed to guess that the ripples in water were his family? I guess I have to make up some stupid stuff. He'll lap it up if I use big words.

"Okay. So, when he...steps up into his house...He is experiencing overwhelming and clashing mortality with common sense because of the....clouds surrounding the sky. He feels like he is triumphant and is starting to balance his life out when...He steps on the last step and turns the key. Um, well, that's it."

"Hmm, good observation." Germany proceeded to write down my words. "I didn't even notice that. We make a good team." He sincerely smiled at me.

"Yeah, totally." I tried to smile back. As soon as we finished, Mr. UK announced the class to be over and we parted ways with Germany. How next class would go that was a question. Hopefully Germany would say everything he told me earlier. I had a German class to go to, ironically. The man whom I call Herr German Empire was sitting at his desk, clearly struggling to understand how a computer works. It would be my job to tell him what to do, and how to work it.

"Hallo Russland." He greeted me, waving to the screen. "Kannst du mir helfen? Ich habe ein paar kleine Probleme mit dieser Computer."

"Natürlich, Herr." I responded, hearing the distinct and horrible Russian accent I had shine through every word. How I became this advanced or how did he even understand me was a mystery.

"Danke!" He was a very cheery man, for an ex war general. He was tall and intimidating, but very kind and helpful. I noticed that he was a very touchy kind of person, and liked contact, in the way that he'd pet your head or hold your hand. It wasn't creepy or weird, and I was glad that my classmates didn't think so either. I was in an intermediate class, which meant that I've never heard his English. I think he never had to deduce what was the character thinking when a leaf fell in front of his face. After I resolved the issue on his computer (he could now figure out how to copy paste), I resumed to my usual seat in the second seat to the left at the round table. Our class was miniature, and we only had three people, including me. My classmates, Slovenia and Vietnam can shortly after me. Slovenia, who was wearing a tight brown vest over a billowing white blouse and skirt, waved at me enthusiastically and Vietnam, with his ever present stern gaze and glasses, mouthed a silent hello.

Our lesson started as soon as Herr German Empire stopped cursing at his computer in anger. I found out that Slovenia was a year older than me, and Vietnam was in third year during our introductory class.

"Why is it so hard?" He muttered at he screen. Slovenia laughed at this and Vietnam smiled a little. After he finished and shut off the monitor, we started the lesson, and I have to say, was way easier and logical than our English class. Our professor liked suits, and would wear a black suit with a different colour tie, either red, blue, black or white, depending on his mood. Today, it was blue. I was in for an easy and not hard class. This time, I was correct. Our group worked together perfectly, and though none of us were up to meeting each other more closely, we maintained a friendly relationship and greeted each other when we met accidentally in the halls. The whole time we worked on grammar, writing and phrasing.

"Well, see you all next class!" Slovenia stood up first, pointing to the clock on the wall. "Bye bye."

"Tschüss," Herr German Empire waved goodbye to all of us.

"Na ja...bis bald." I told him and Vietnam, who waved and disappeared as silently as he appeared an hour and a half ago.

I well managed to write some more nonsense for my English class. Hopefully Mr. UK, just like Germany, liked the use of big words and stupid symbology. If he sees through my guise though, I'm as good as dead. I briefly met America in the hall, and he said that he'd text the group about something later. With the strange twinkle in his eye, I hope it isn't socialising. With the last and best class of the day, I had to tell myself that I was half-right with my prediction. It was an easy day, not counting English. Luxembourg greeted me as he opened the classroom door.

"Hey, Russia!" He let me come in first. The smell of pine wood and metal hit my face, and the now obstructed sky was shining through the window on the high ceiling. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Did you have a nice day?"

"It was okay. I had English though." I made a face, showing my unhappiness.

"Ah, English. Everybody's favourite. Are you reading anything enlightening?"

"No. Some story called 'The Water on the Wood' It's about as dull as it sounds."

"Yes, yes. Britain gave it to me to read. I was sleeping by page four." He chuckled. "Are you analysing it?" He made air quotes when he said that.

"Yes. And I am horrible at it."

"I can never pretend I like things. But when there's a will, there's a way. Just get through it. It becomes easier."

"I guess."

"Today will be a fun class. For some. Application of theoretical mathematics to physical instruments. That's going to make Japan crazy."

"What?" Japan asked as she hopped in. Dropping her pink bookbag next to mine, she waved hello to Luxembourg and hugged me. "What's going to make me crazy?"

"Nothing, honey." Luxembourg laughed. "You'll find out. Don't tell her, Russia."

"Tell me, Rus." She immediately commanded me.

"Oh no." I cried dramatically. "Professor Luxembourg will fail e of I tell you. I'll get a one for the semester if that happens!"

"Yes. I will fail Russia if he tells you anything." Luxembourg said in a mock low and gravelly voice.

"See?" I kept on. "What a horrible teacher!"

"Mhmm. I am a dictator." Luxembourg nodded and then smiled. "Hello to everyone who joined us. Please kindly disregard my drama show with Russia and Japan. I am not a dictator, but I have all the power in the world to fail people. How nice, right? But in all seriousness, we have a lesson that will make you either hate or love engineering for the rest of your life, so pay attention." I went over to Japan, who was already digging in my bag. Not only did she eat my food and tell me what to read, now she's in my bag. I've noticed that Japan was an intruder of privacy, Iceland was very forgetful, America was plainly, just loud and stupid, and Germany behaved like a rock outside of the classroom.

"Why is Iceland's name on your phone?" Japan said in an annoying and mocking manner. "Russia....?" She was holding a phone with a brown leather case, with Iceland's flag stuck on it.

"I think that's his." I pointed out. "As you might notice, my phone is in Cyrillic, not Latin letters. So you can definitely say that *my* phone is in my pocket." I showed her my own, which was a plain and old smartphone, encased in a military grade, several centimetres thick black case. Nothing on it gave a sign that it was mine, but when I turned it on, the screen flashed with the twenty four hour format time, and the date was written in Russian. The lock screen was also my flag in the background, so surely somebody can recognise it. "Iceland might've forgotten to put his phone in his bag."

"As usual." She sighed. It was already slipping out of her fingers.

"Don't drop it." I warned. "It might crack."

"Why does he forget so many things?" Japan said, while putting the phone back into my bag. "That's why you're his only friend. Because he forgets everyone else."

"Not true." I sighed, but I knew that in truth, she was right.

"Yeah, yeah. Keep defending." Japan giggled.

"So guys. Today we are doing something very important. We are

going to start some applications. And not just any application. Theoretical Mathematics and simple calculus to physical instruments. How cool is that? So firstly, let's review some important formulas..." Luxembourg interrupted out little argument, and we had to fall silent. After he finished, the shocking scene of Germany coming in late went right before our eyes. Without attracting much attention, he trudged to Luxembourg, muttered something while passing a note, and the latter nodded, accepted the pass and waved him to us, while explaining the instructions.

"Hi Germany! What happened?" Japan asked him when he sat down. I started to write down some of the basic formulas and shifted through the metal pieces to find some gears. Though inside, I was wondering why Germany's mood had changed so drastically and why he was late.

"I was busy...being disappointed." He responded vaguely. As if the conversation was over, he looked over to me and asked for elaborated instructions. Leaving Japan speechless and not engaging in more conversation unless he needed help. While I did what I was told, and helped other people, I thought about Germany. Were we a stone and a leaf? Did I leave deep marks and large grudges, while he floated down like a leaf in the wind, leaving behind hardships and focusing on his future. I was shaped by my past, and maybe, just maybe...I should try to change?

Kannst du mir helfen? Ich habe ein paar kleine Probleme mit dieser Computer - Can you help me? I am having some small problems with this computer. (Again, I'm not using a translator)

Natürlich, Herr - Of course, sir

Tschüss - bye.

Na ja, bis bald - well, see you soon.

Socialism vs Socialising

[image]

I came out of the engineering class quickly, not trying to talk to anyone. I thanked Russia without emotion and when he responded, I dashed out of the class. I think my behaviour scared Japan and worried Russia, but I also had a life to think about. I initially came into the class late because I wanted to do something before...I needed to meet somebody. I thought that our meeting would take a five minutes, not longer, but it stretched out into thirty. I was asked by Japan what happened, and I snapped at her very unexpectedly from the amount of irritation I was feeling. I wanted to say sorry afterward, but didn't have the energy. I'll apologise later. What actually happened was I met my grandfather. For me, it was consciously my first time. I haven't seen him for years, the last time was when I was about six months old. When Russia said that he took a class with him, I was surprised and intrigued. I vowed that the next day, I would find him and maybe talk. I couldn't sleep that night and I felt very cheery that morning. I even worked with Russia on an assignment in English. He looked very lost, and seemed to make some stuff up as he went, but I took it in stride. At least he used literary devices, so I didn't press any further. To be honest, the book that we were reading, The Water on the Wood, was very dry, slow paced and primarily focused on feelings and nuance, rather than dialogue and description. I had a feeling that Russia would rather have died than decipher the meaning behind the book. I left the class and throughout the day, I asked my professors if they knew where Mr. German Empire could be found.

After my Biology class, Profesor España or Professor Spain showed me where I could find him and walked down with me. He said that he needed to conduct his Spanish class there anyway.

"Alemania," he laughed. "You already know German. Why do you need him?"

"I just...um. I don't know." I shrugged. "I wanted to talk to somebody in German..." I partially lied to him. I didn't want my teacher to connect two and two. Good for me, he didn't press further.

"Ah, I see." He nodded, though in his maple coloured eyes, I could see that he knew I was lying. We walked down to the language hall and he pointed to the hall on the left, and told me to take care.

"Bye!" I thanked him.

"Adios niño." He waved and turned the corner. I tried to slow down by speeding heart and swift feet and I stood behind the open door to the office, doubting myself. I could definitely hear him inside. It was definitely German. I bit my lip and looked inside. The small classroom with a circular table gave off a non threatening feel, while the top of the walls sported heater vents, pulsing warmth into the room. A rectangular desk at the head of the classroom was occupied by a very tall man in a grey suit and white tie. That could only be my grandfather. Though he didn't look particularly old, he was busily copying steps from a 'Computer for Dummies' book and implementing them on the screen. On the desk stood a couple of globe paperweights, some folders, what I guessed was his old war helmet, and a glass of tea. He didn't turn to me yet, but I could see that his black, white and red face looked tired. I carefully stepped into the classroom and quietly knocked on the doorframe. I could clearly hear my heart beating audibly, and the more time I observed him, the faster it became.

"Mmm, ja?" He turned to face me, his eyes the last to turn. After they did, we looked at each other for a long time. He didn't move or speak, but his dark orange gaze travelled all across me. He then craned his neck slowly forward, squinting and his mouth turned into a frown. "Deutschland? Bis..bist du das?"

"Ja. Ich bin es." He looked up at something on the ceiling, sighed loudly and then smiled. I didn't know what to do, so I just stayed silent while he did what he needed. Right at that moment, he was laughing. It was very, very awkward.

"Deutschland! I cannot believe it, you're here! Alive and well!" He finally stood up, in all his height and hugged me. He was probably a bit smaller than USSR, but I became not used to tall people over the last three months. I hugged him back, and had the urge to cry. Did he think I died? Is that what everyone thought? I was very upset for my grandfather, whom probably felt lonely and sad that all of his relatives either left him geographically or life wise.

"Hi grandpa." I stroked his head. He let go of me after two whole minutes and kept patting my shoulder as if he needed proof that I wasn't a ghost of some sort.

"Oh Deutschland, I'm so glad you are here. I thought that I was alone, among people that hate or are terrified of me. It's so nice to talk to someone without superficiality. How are you, how was your life? How is your father?" Uh oh. I think my grandfather might be more unattached from the outside world than I thought. Didn't he know that a world war happened? Or was he too busy doing something else? How can I say 'Well grandpa, it's very sad, but my dad was killed and not only am I depressed about it, but I also live with his consequences and debts. Oh, not to mention we made a world war and killed millions and betrayed someone.' I think it sounded like I was sarcastic in my head, but I explained everything, I would probably break down in tears by the middle.

"Deutschland?"

"Ja?"

"Is...everything all right? You didn't answer my question."

"Grandpa...have you listened to the radio lately?" I asked cautiously.

"Um...no. Should I?"

"I have to tell you that....that Vati...He isn't fine....he's far from fine.

He's well....I can't." I couldn't finish my sentence.

"What's wrong? Has he gotten ill?" If only.

"Nein.....he's dead. He's dead, grandpa." I choked out. Instead of sadness, my grandfathers face was surprised and a bit annoyed. He still comforted me and said he was sorry, but he wasn't as devastated as a father was to losing his son. After all, a father should never bury his son.

"Hm, I thought he said he was a survivor. So much for that." He muttered to himself. "What did he do? Did he die of disease?"

"No. He started a war. And didn't finish it."

"Typical Drittes Reich. Thinks that he's top of the world. He wanted to go down in history. Serves him right to be miserable." I was utterly shocked by my grandfather's attitude towards this. "I think, child, you are better off without such a horrible influence. Who are you living with now?"

"USSR." I answered curtly.

"Who's that...? Oh, yes, Russian Empire's unruly son. Kind of reminds me of my own. But maybe he's a better father. Not as career obsessed. More of a family person. Good." This was not how I imagined our conversation. He didn't even want to ask what I felt about my father, how I felt about the war or what even happened. Why was he so passive about such a serious topic?

"Um, what happened to you, Grandpa?" I tried to switch subject desperately. "Where were you all this time?"

"Ah, I was at a house of an unexpected ally. I was taking care of my cactus collection and helping your great uncle back to health. Poison gas doesn't really help your lungs, you know."

"Cactus collection?" Those words registered with me. How could he worry about cacti when major world events were happening. Did he know that UN was created? Or that Israel became internationally recognised? Or that I was being tossed from one pair of greedy hands to another, only one of them bothering to take care of me?

"Ja. Me and Austria Hungary sort of ran, well crawled actually to the Far East and found an abandoned house in the Himalayan region. After some time and disguising, we started to converse with the locals, Nepal and Bhutan and some others. They never realised who we were. After that, we went back to the West. Austria Hungary went back to his sons, who give him a comfy life, mind you, and I was caught by Britain, this time begging to accept a post at his new school that he built. The pay is good, and I live a life free from my past's shadow."

"Oh, I see." I said, my voice starting to get hoarse.

"You should get over this death as well." He continued. "Your father was not a good man. You are, as I said before, better off without him." When he finished, he smiled at me once again, and brushed his fingers over my jaw. The urge to peel them off was overwhelming and I even held my hand to grasp them, not yet prying them off my lower face. I didn't exactly expect sympathy towards my father, but I did want somebody to understand what it was like to lose someone you loved but nobody else did. Apparently, my grandfather would rather grow cacti and engage in tea drinking with United Kingdom. I was disappointed and unhappy at the news. "But you can still come to me, Deutschland. I love you, and always will no matter what." With that he kissed me lightly on the cheek.

"Me too." I kissed him back. "Oh. I'm kind of late." I noticed that my class that I was supposed to be in, had already started and was thirty minutes in.

"Do you want me to write you a pass?" He asked me, while rummaging through some folders. "That way you'll have an excuse."

"Danke." I nodded. After he wrote a hastily written note on a pre-printed yellow pass, he handed it to me, stood up and tilted my head up to look up at his face.

"Are you sure you are okay?" He asked again. Even though he felt nothing for his son, he did truly love me like a grandchild. I knew he would, and I was sort of glad that one person loved me for who I am. I did my best to look happy and smiled in response, this time

peeling his fingers off my chin.

"Yes. I just have to go." I explained. "I'm kind of anxious."

"Aren't we all." He resumed to his hard backed wooden chair and saw me go. "If you need anything, just come by. I'll be happy to see you!"

"I will. Goodbye." He probably didn't hear my whispered speech, so I left quite dissatisfied up the hall and outside.

"Bye!" He called when I was already halfway down.

"Bye." I said to myself as I opened the door and left the building. I should've brought a jacket with me, since the November cold nipped the air and let all of the students know that it had won over the Autumn's warm touch. The trees around the campus had all lost their leaves and submitted to the wind's arms, letting it push them around. I felt my cheeks grow cold and as soon as I entered the physics and engineering building, I was greeted by the warm air from the vents. Walking down the halls, I heard Luxembourg explaining something to our class. I thought I might've been very late, since our professor was a bit slow on getting started, but usually kept his class going till last minute. I walked in with my head down, examining the hard metal flooring instead of looking up at everyone. Handing Luxembourg the note, I quickly explained my absence.

"Of course." He took me to my group's table, where Japan and Russia were already doing something. At least, Russia was. "I understand."

"Hi Germany!" Japan waved at me. She looked worried and asked me what happened. Her fluffy light purple sweater with some Japanese writing matched the colour of Russia's eyes, which were trained on his work, shifting through the metal on the table.

"I was busy....being disappointed." I muttered. I clenched my jaw and asked Russia to help me, not engaging in conversation with Japan. I could see her shocked face and ears droop in my peripheral vision, but I was too fired up to apologise at the moment. Russia

helped me without question, and he never asked me what was going on. I let him guide me through some of the harder steps, and when I understood, he left to help other people, his project already finished and standing next to Japan.

"Thanks Russia." I told him once the class was finished.

"You are welcome." He smiled back. Sensing that he might ask what happened, I packed my things, took my books off the table, and ran out of the class. I could hear Japan running after me, and I doubled back, took a secret route and shortcutted though a hedgerow to avoid her detection.

"GERMANY! WHAT'S WRONG, GERMANY?" I heard her yowl. Ducking behind some pine trees, I observed Russia calmly walking towards Japan and telling her something. I inched closer to hear their conversation.

"What's wrong with him?" She said, scanning the surrounding area.

"I don't know." He replied. "Maybe..." we made eye contact. I gasped audibly, but didn't hide again. Russia squinted at me and nodded slowly.

"I wonder why he's so angry? We should find him."

"No. We shouldn't." He kept his eyes on me the whole time.

"Why not? It seems like what a friend should do."

"Leave the guy alone." Russia tugged at her sleeve. "I think he needs time away from us." With that, he broke the stare and walked on and away with Japan in tow. I sighed in relief and trotted to my college. Finland stuck a note on the dorm door for me, telling me that he will be late and I shouldn't wait for him. He was at a seminar. I unlocked the door and took off my glasses, setting them on the table, before slithering on the floor and laying there, with no desire to move. The floor felt cold and rough on my exposed skin, but that's what I wanted to do. Lay on the ground and do nothing. I thought that I left my stuff outside my room, but I was positive that nobody would steal it. I didn't know how to think of my

grandfather. Should I not be mad, since he was basically cut off from the world for almost twenty years? Or should I be skeptical, since those years were spent in a home in the mountains, the only worry to have is that your cacti plants look wilty. I never met my great uncle, but I did hear about him on USSR's radio, where his high pitched and annoying voice was talking about the horrors of war, while he himself was in a villa next to Italian territory with all the comforts and amenities and servants a sickly and fussy old emperor needs. USSR said that he was a king without a crown, but government is messy and dangerous, and sometimes you would give up your rule for a life of pleasure travel, velvet cushions and expensive food. My thoughts were interrupted by a light ping of my phone on the desk. So I did heave my things over the threshold. I groaned and stood up to see the text. I brought the phone closer to my face to read the message. It was from America.

"Hi everybody! How's it going? Just wanted to say that I want to invite y'all for a spot of tea at a café nearby. Anyone up to it? Love and Rainbows."

"Seriously America? Rainbows?" Russia typed out.

"Hey Russi, relax. I'll get you two free drinks. How about that?" America responded in a matter of seconds.

"Good. I'll hold you to that."

"Anyone else?"

"I'LL GO AMERICA!!!!" Japan texted in all caps.

"What?" Iceland said. "I just got my phone from Rus' bag. I totally forgot it yesterday."

"As usual." Japan commented. "You coming?"

"No. I have to make up missing work. I kind of...you know."

"Forgot it?" Japan finished.

"Yeah. Something of the sort."

"Is Germany coming?" America interjected.

"You know...He was super mad when we saw him today." Japan remarked. "He ran away from me and Rus."

"Really? Mad? Like Russia mad?"

"Seriously, you all are the worst. Leave the man be." Russia messaged.

"Like you'd know." America sent an emoji symbol with a knowing face.

"No. I just felt it."

"I'll come." I wrote, and everyone stopped writing for a moment.

"GERMANY! HOW COULD YOU IGNORE *MEEEE*!!!" Japan was the first to respond. "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU!?"

"I'm sorry, Japan. I was a bit angry at the time. Didn't want to apologise until I calmed down." I told her. "I can explain when we meet."

"That's okay. No need to apologise. I'm just glad you're okay." She sent a smiley face.

"Okay guys. Enough dilly-dally emotiony time. We can discuss that later. Anyone who's coming, meet me at the gate in five." America announced.

"Hours?" Russia asked innocently.

"Minutes, Russ, minutes." With that, he signed off.

"Okay. See you all there." Russia left the chat as well.

"Have a good time, lucky people." Iceland said jealously. Maybe a bit of socialising and voicing my problems would help. I knew I could trust Japan. And I could definitely trust Russia. He showed that he really cared. I think he would be my truest friend, one that gave me space, made me calm and could stand up for me when

needed.

Alemania - Germany

Adios niño - goodbye child

Deutschland? Bis..bis du das? - Germany? Is that you?

Ja. Bin es - Yes. It is me.

Kind of a long chapter. My resolution for making shorter chapters isn't working.

Warmth

[image]

I was standing outside with America, waiting for Germany and Japan to get to the main gates. I wore my thicker jacket this time, a navy blue old coat with white wool and a grey fur trim. America was listening to some blues on his phone, proudly broadcasting it for all to hear and he, as usual, was not dressed for the weather.

"I'm kind of cold." America announced. He sang along with the verses, chanting lyrics about sadness and hope. Typical America and his old music.

"No duh. You're dressed for the beach." I replied.

"I thought you guys would move faster," he whined. "After all, who wouldn't run if I offered free stuff?"

"I did. Free is my favourite word." I smirked.

"We know. You like free things." He kept looking back and forth, awaiting for the rest of our group. "Where are they...oh, I see Germany." He waved to the approaching figure and turned off his next song that was just beginning. To me, all blues sounded the same, blue and depressing.

"Hi," Germany said as he came. He was wearing a pair of round glasses with gold frames this time, and a black coat with his name stitched on in contrasting white letters. "Sorry for being late. I wanted to change."

"You're not the last person." America shivered. "Oh my god, Japan. How can she be so slow?"

"Should I message her?" I took out my phone.

"Yeah. Tell her we're going. America is turning into an icicle." He signalled for us to follow him. After a few minutes, she responded

flooding the chat with sad faces.

"She said she can't. Something private," I gave my phone for America to read.

"Why didn't she tell us before?" He sighed, exasperated. "She told us that she'd go!"

"It's Japan. It's like throwing a coin." Germany smiled. We turned a corner through the city to a section I haven't seen before. There were less people, and the shops and boutiques looked miniature, intimate and too expensive. Definitely not my type of shopping and dining area. Germany was also looking around, craning his neck and rounding his eyes at each shop we passed.

"Hey Germany? Can I ask a question?" America asked in front of us.

"Go ahead."

"What was the deal with you running from Japan before?" He turned to him when we reached a crosswalk. Germany looked uncomfortable and started to fidget with the straps on his sleeves. I wanted to cover for him, but I knew this time, he would have to stand for himself.

"Ah," he sighed. "Well, if you really want to know....I kind of well. Okay, I'll start from the beginning."

"Good idea." America nodded.

"So. Yesterday, Russia was talking about his German class and who was the teacher. Two plus two, I found that this guy is my grandfather. I was pretty excited and nervous the whole night and the morning of today, so that's why I looked so happy in English."

"Oh, I thought it was because you were happy to learn some stuff." I joked. He smiled and then continued.

"I decided to meet him after my Biology class. Professor España also taught Spanish, so he showed me where to go. I was actually a bit scared to meet my grandfather, since it's been so long, but when I did....everything was okay at first. He wasn't mean or angry. He was

very nice to me and was very happy to see me. But when things started to get down to...well, my dad...I figured out that he didn't exactly know what's going on in the modern world. He spoke so...unattached and told me to get over death and that it was all so light and fluffy. I'll bet it is when you're in the Himalayas with your brother, tending to yaks and cacti. He just didn't understand that after war...there are hardships and horrors that he's never witnessed. And his attitude and outlook really upset me. He doesn't understand *my* pain or what I went through. After all, you can't just 'shake off' a war. I didn't want to be asked about it too soon, so I kind of snapped at Japan. It probably surprised her. So yeah."

"Oof. Must've been super horrible." America grimaced. "Are you okay now though?"

"Mhmm. Still a bit disappointed, but what could I expect?" He shrugged. "But I did lie on the floor for five minutes. That sort of helped."

"Oh. I would've been super sad. Like, if my granddad told me to just 'get over it', I wouldn't be in class that day or for the next week actually."

"Well, we're all different." He pointed out. "But I think that staying inside and moping can't help me."

"Sure it can't. Glad you could join us in spite of your...."

"Little problem?" Germany giggled. "Yeah, it's not a big deal. I definitely feel better now that I told you all." He looked at me with gratitude in his eyes. "Thanks for covering for me that time."

"Sure. Looked like you just needed space." I looked away like it was nothing, but I knew my face heated up from embarrassment. America led us into a modern cafe with large glass windowfaces and wood panel tabletops. A place that people pay to just sit in. He led us in, and we sat at a table by the window that looked out onto the street. Germany sat down next to me, and America faced us from the other side.

"This is a nice place." Germany commented, flipping though the

menu that sat in the middle of the table. I unzipped my coat and placed it on the back of my chair, while America sighed happily for the warm atmosphere. There weren't many people in the cafe but I recognised some students from the university. One teenage boy waved to Germany, who smiled at him half heartedly. "Switzerland. Distant family." He took off his own coat, and revealed a red woollen sweater with a high neck.

"He looks rich." I noted. The boy, Switzerland, had so many of the key things that my father always looked out for when targeting rich people. The clothes, the walk, the looks, the way he tilted his chin and the watch. Don't forget the ever present little frown when he saw me, some proletarian in his comfy little cafe. How sad that he'd have to share.

"Russ! Be quiet!" America hissed, but he was smiling. "Any other adjectives that you can describe people by?"

"Yeah. Fussy, egotistical, haughty, annoying, whiny and hypocritical."

"I'm all that?" America rounded his eyes, the effect slightly ruined by the fact that he couldn't make his mouth cooperate.

"No. You're a different type. A better type."

"Good. Found anything, Germany?" America asked, as Germany counted something on his fingers.

"Um, what's cold brew? Is that like cold tea?" He pointed to the menu.

"No, it's brewed in th cold for more than twelve hours."

"Ew." I shook my head.

"I think I'll take something hot. What would you recommend?" Germany gave the menu to me. I scanned through the drinks and all my eyes wanted to do was look at the prices. How can you pay 6£ for a coffee? Granted it was some sort of rare and wanted coffee bean, but six pounds is six pounds. I've gotten quite adjusted to the currency change from Russian rubles to the British pound. I even

started to switch my own meager notes for some small amounts of the British currency. America, on the other hand, was busy taking out bills of US Dollars and I wondered how picky exactly can people get with money.

"I would recommend a cappuccino. Those are warm and sweet usually." He offered absentmindedly. "What do you want, Russ?"

"Six pounds, I mean I don't know." I said quickly.

"Don't know?" He smirked. "Look at the description!"

"All I see is prices." I admitted.

"Fine. I'll get you something. You'll like it." He called a waiter over and ordered. When the latter told him the wait time, the American muttered under his breath as the waiter walked away. "Ten minutes? How long does it take to make some coffee?"

"I've never made any before," Germany responded.

"You put coffee in the pot. The machine does everything else for you." We ended up listening to America's rants about coffee. He certainly liked it. He told us how he would steal it from his older brother and how he eventually got caught. By that time, he had an addiction and couldn't control it any longer. When he finished his story, he spotted the waiter coming back. "Oh, finally."

"Here you are, sir." The waiter said quietly.

"Here." America passed a couple of notes to the waiter in response.

"These are dollars sir.."

"Keep the change." America waved him off. That seemed to satisfy him and he left with a bow. "Greedy. I never will switch to pounds. Okay...this is much mine. This is yours, Russ. And the cappuccino, Germany. I promise you'll be hooked."

"Just what I need." Germany accepted his drink with a dry note.

"I got you an Anijsmelk, Russ. It's hot milk with anise and sugar. It's

a Dutch drink."

"Thank you." The flavour was sweet and interesting. I generally liked anise, but I've never seen it in a drink.

"You're welcome. Hey, how'd you get accepted, by the way? Not that I'm saying that you don't belong, but I rarely see anyone who doesn't either have a lot of money or a lot of mind. I mean, nerdyness. Like Germany." Germany in turn, looked away, trying to make a harassed face competing with a smile.

"Well....I didn't know either. I was at my house, typical Saturday. My brother was whining about wanting to do something. The usual. And then, my father got the mail, at a perfect time, I was busy....showering. By his voice tone he sounded angry, but he said that he was proud and very surprised. The next day he dropped me off at my older brother's apartment in the city and....left. I haven't heard from him since. I hope he's okay."

"Cool. Interesting. What a turn of events." America clapped.

"Is your brother Estonia?" Germany turned to me, cocking his head to the side.

"Yeeeees," I said slowly. "Whyyyyyyy?"

"Oh. I just know him. He asked me to say hi."

"Yay. He's fourth year. The apartment I stayed in for about two hours was his. Plain, drab and also very delicate. I was afraid to even step on the floor."

"He's okay. My flatmate is his friend."

"Your roommate is a fourth year!?" America almost spat out his coffee. "Wow!"

"Yeah. His name is Finland."

"Mine is Iceland. That's why we're best friends." I noticed Germany wilt a bit when I said that. "What about you America?"

"I have a guy named Poland. He's also fourth year. But he's only temporary. Something happened to his dorm room. It's being renovated. My real roommate is Bahrain. We had some things in common, but he went and befriended a lot of people in some student run club. I don't see him often and we don't cross paths of we can help it now. Bahrain is in second year with me."

"Hmm. Do you like your temporary flatmate?" I asked.

"Oh, he's fine. A bit jumpy, but he always is so serious. He's also stressed about the cumulative graduation project. His last model for his class was destroyed, so now the permanent smell of sweat and vodka has dominated my room. No biggie."

"Basically my father," I laughed.

"Basically, only younger, thinner, more worried and obsessed over planes and likes mobiles."

"Mobiles?"

"Like those things that are hanged above baby carriages. Poland loves those. He hung one for himself and me. I was just wondering, what if I wake up and the thing crashes on me? Or what if I think it's a monster? He doesn't even care about what I think."

"Eh, my flatmate has his whiteboard, papers and calculations all over the place. I don't mind, though." Germany shrugged. "Thank you for the drink. You were right. I do like it."

"Of course," America looked around and then waved the same waiter over, asking for some food. "I'm hungry. Again."

"Aren't we all." I sighed.

"Do you want anything?" America asked.

"Oh, no. I've stepped over the debt line already."

"Oh Russ. We all are in somebody's debt. Just accept it. I won't ask for payment."

"Riiiiiiight," I narrowed my eyes playfully. Germany laughed, which made me feel a little warmer and confident. "But seriously, I'm not hungry."

"Okay. I was just teasing."

"Germany, what is your story?" I asked. "Now that I know that we kind of share a father figure."

"Oh, sure," he seemed surprised at being adressed by me. "Well, um, okay. So I think I'm a bit younger than you. Not by much, maybe a half a year. I didn't see my biological father much at the time since he was out...doing stuff." He stopped and bit his lip. We all stayed silent, and both him and America looked at me, waiting for an explosion that would never come.

"Go on." I prompted calmly. He nodded quickly and his voice became more even this time.

"So I was left to wander around our home, sometimes I would go on trips with my father to some fronts. I got into some trouble, some adventure. My father would tutor me most of the evenings and left the rest for private teachers. But then....He died. I don't want to go deep down that. So I'll leave that for later."

"Good idea." America silently thanked the waiter and started to nibble on a cheese danish from the plate.

"After that, I had the feeling that I was being passed around from hand to hand. Not physically, but it felt like I was shifting on the inside. At first it was violent, then it slowly faded. I barely feel it now. Only at night, and under certain circumstances. But I think that you....have guardianship over me? I don't know about that."

"Some. As you can see, I don't have time for that stuff." He grinned.

"I guess. But Mr. USSR took good care of me. I went to some public school. First year was rough, but my last year, hardly anyone noticed me. Mr. USSR wanted me to be a mathematician for his factories, but you know...I thought that was kind of boring. I applied to this university on a whim, and I got accepted. I was

really happy that day." We clapped and he bowed in our direction.

"Great story. You should write a book." America suggested, not eating a strawberry filled pastry. He handed Germany a blueberry muffin and gave me a blackberry danish. "Try it. You might like these."

"I saw them at the breakfast table." Germany explained, peeling the wrapping off it. "I thought that they shouldn't be there. Sweets for breakfast? Really?" He became silent when he chewed the soft baked good. "But it does taste good."

"You're actually good at accounting, Germany. Maybe you might be good at economics after all."

"Maybe. I like the class."

"Do you like ours?" I asked.

"Yeah, I like it. It's very...interesting and practical. Luxembourg is very funny sometimes. He almost cut his whole arm off with a power tool."

"He's too small to be manning one of those. The blade came this close to his arm." I showed America the distance with my fingers and his eyes widened.

"That's horrible! And unsafe!"

"Eh, also fun." Germany giggled at America's horrified face.

"You guys!" He moaned. "How did I know I was coming with two maniacs who think that having somebody chop off their arm is fun!"

"We're just kidding," Germany soothed and high-fived me. "But we did almost see him do that."

"Ugh. War kids." America muttered, but we laughed. "Y'all find that sawing off a limb is no big deal."

"Oh America. You also have your good stuff. I like your Jazz music by the way." Germany sighed.

"Serious!?" America bolted upright. "Really? Or is this another joke?"

"No. It's another joke." Germany said slyly. "I definitely don't listen to it on radio sometimes."

"And you didn't tell me?" He sounded hurt.

"Only sometimes. Not often. It gets annoying too quickly." Germany finished his muffin and placed the wrapper on the now empty plate. "Russia, what's your favourite genre?"

"Um, I don't know. It depends. It's more of the song than the genre. Maybe country. Pop. Folk music is usually very good. I like most of it."

"Oh, cool. I have a good country playlist. I could share it with you."

"Thank you. That would be nice."

"You're a good group. Nice. Not innocent. Far from that. But very interesting." America regarded us from a distance. "Less loud than Japan and less forgetful and quiet than Iceland." I smirked into the cup and Germany looked away, not wanting to have eye contact.

"Aw, that's funny." Germany said. "Never knew I was that special." He stirred his almost empty cup with his spoon and looked at me. And smiled. Maybe we could really put all these grudges behind. I smiled back.

"You're blushing." Germany pointed out, slightly ruining the effect. Yay for you Russia.

A Screwdriver, a Chainsaw and Second Thoughts

[image]

It was very nice of America to invite us to go out with him. I was glad that I accepted his offer, since it let me get to know him and Russia better and I eventually even confided in them both about my problem. Russia wasn't even angry at me! There's a first. After some time, America started to talk about his family. He talked about his older brother Canada and his twin younger siblings, Australia and New Zealand. He became very outspoken and was enjoying the attention that the other people in the cafe. That was, until he leaned forward and spoke so quietly that I strained to hear.

"I'm an illegitimate child." He blurted out. Russia almost choked on his now cold drink.

"Whoa! America, too fast!" He exclaimed, his pupils became smaller, and his lavender iris expanded. "What?!" I just stared at him, in shock.

"Yeah. I thought you should know. Since we're on family topics."

"But...how? Who's your real mother or father?"

"My dad's Britain. Can't do anything about that. He'll always be. My mom isn't France."

"How did you find out?" I pestered him.

"I took one of those Genetic tests. For a laugh, you know. I didn't find the results funny that's for sure." He sighed. "I didn't tell my family at all, and I want to keep it that way. My real mother is Portugal. I haven't told her anything either. But I'm not saying my current family is horrible! I love France, I will always call her 'mom' and Canada, Australia and New Zealand will always be my real brothers. Dad will always be annoying and dull, but he's caring. I

never was abused or anything. I was never ever treated like an outcast or someone different. So it's more of if my brothers find out than I tell my parents."

"Oh," Russia nodded. "I see. Since your parents know and everything."

"Mhmm." America agreed. "Depressing. But whatever. How about you, Russia? Any special things your family does? I really wasn't to get off topic. I just wanted you to know. You're my friends now."

"Do you tell all of your friends?" I asked.

"No. Just you guys." I puzzled over why he trusted us over all of his other friends all together. "Go on, Russ."

"Ah, well...my family is big. Currently, we have this big house in the middle of nowhere and my father and younger siblings live there. I have fourteen brothers and sisters."

"Fourteen?" America gasped. "Fourteen?!"

"Yes. Fourteen." Russia smiled. "But only me and my younger siblings lived in the big house. All of my older siblings left for university and never came back. Well, some of them do, but they don't always enjoy their stay. So me, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, respectively by age."

"Cool. Any funny stories? Or are your sibling too little for that?"

"No. Ukraine is now thirteen, almost fourteen, and Belarus is ten, and Kazakhstan is five, almost six. So I had to do most of the grunt work. That doesn't mean that we were distant. No, we had fun together. Once Belarus let all of our chickens out while I was eating my lunch outside. Bad idea, never did that again." He laughed.

"What happened?" America leaned forward to listen.

"Our rooster, named Caramel I don't know why it's named that way, that's a female name, but Belarus wanted. Anyway, Caramel trotted up to me and pecked at the back of my bread and salad chicken sandwich. The rooster ate chicken! I couldn't believe it. The worst

part is that Caramel attracted the attention of all of the other chickens too. Soon they all were eating my sandwich, which was chicken. After that I found that chickens do eat their own cooked meat. The best eater was a skinny little chick named Sunny. She even gnawed at my fingers. And Belarus never batted an eye, she said that she's been feeding them leftovers from her plate as well."

"Oh boy...are your chickens in the house?"

"Oh no. They're very disgusting. They don't know what a bathroom is." Russia shook his head. "But we do have like one in our house...it was a birthday gift from Mr. China to Kazakhstan. It's a fragile little thing. Very fluffy and cute though, it's one of those Silkie Chickens. We keep it in a box, because it's very small and the other chickens pick on it. It's name is Masha. Very docile and easy to keep. I highly recommend these little silkies. Even my father, who was sceptical about them at first was happy to pet and cuddle with Masha. He loves her."

"Really? Wow. Are they that nice?"

"Yeah, they're great. But China sells them for a high price. Only he has them. You might get some that are cheaper, but they might be hybrids and might have either bad feathers, or bad personalities. China has the best ones, since he knows how to breed them. To ensure that, he doesn't sell cockarelles. Only pullets. Smart idea."

"You know your chicken jargon," America snickered. "How about explaining?"

"Oh, sure. A cockarelle is a male chick. A pullet is a female chick. There are straight run, both male and female chickens. Cornish Rocks are meat chickens. My father prefers to have egg laying chickens. I'm glad, because Belarus is really attached to our current flock. She was horrified when she found that our Holodetz was made out of her favourite. Nasty surprise."

"Oooooh. Horrible." America shuddered. He looked down at the wood panel table and picked at the pure white plate, taking the crumbs off till it shone with the small specks of grease left from the pastries. "Are you guys finished? It's almost dark."

"Yeah, I think we should. I don't like the dark." I admitted. He nodded and we all put on our coats on and left. I was glad, since the waiters were starting to stare at me. Before, Switzerland waved at me and Russia and America asked how I knew him. I didn't want to tell them that I went to my "crazy doctor" uncle. He was actually my first cousin, once removed. But uncle or first cousin, you don't want to be associated with a notorious lunatic on campus. He didn't even look or sound crazy. Why he has that reputation or even if he knows it exists is a question. As we walked down the streets, the lights started to go on, and it felt like we were in a tunnel, the neon yellows, greens, reds and pinks all flashed and blinked all around as if we were in a train, going by the town. Huge billboards with animated commercials and somehow replaced the old and quiet harbour city's tiny windows. I could see Russia's scowling face was illuminated by the lights, and he was visibly unhappy. Living in an area with true darkness at night and quiet all year long, he probably was not used to the steady beat of the city life. I didn't help matters when a storefront opened its door and loud music almost vibrated the whole area. America, on the other hand, had his head bobbing to the music and was very comfortable under the light watch of the moon.

"Don't love the nightlife, Russ?" America had to yell to get Russia's attention.

"No." Russia said back. He sounded frighteningly like USSR when he raised his voice. "I hate this. You can't even see they sky. Or hear yourself!"

"Sorry Russ! We'll be there soon." America's voice was much more suited to be raised, he was actually more comfortable yelling. Russia, on the other hand, was already a bit hoarse from having a twenty second yelling conversation.

"We better." Russia rasped. He cleared his throat and became silent. We crossed the final road, me almost getting under the bumper if Russia hadn't pulled me by the hand out in time. America warned us that the drivers here were rough, especially at night.

"It's their time," he explained. "They aren't tailed by police and have mostly free reign."

"Awful." My voice shook from the shock and I felt my heart beating in my throat. The car was centimetres away from my face. It was pure chance that Russia could grab my coat. I felt stupid and grateful that Russia saved me and that I needed saving. "Why do they have to cut though pedestrian traffic?"

"Welcome to the West Night." America laughed. "Where you can die anytime!"

"Arghh," I groaned and Russia shot me a look of sympathy.

"I'm not used to this too," he sighed. "I'm a country child."

"Suburban," I pointed to myself. "I had a freeway exit, but I never got run over!" I was interrupted by a buzz in my pocket. It was a text for Luxembourg. Russia got one too.

"Hey everyone, I just wanted to say that tomorrow is a big day. We'll be using power tools. I want you guys to be ready and mentally prepared. I have some second thoughts on this, but you are my best group so far, and I think it's time to move on. What do you all think?"

"Awesome!" Russia texted back. "Always wanted to use a chainsaw without my father."

"That's why I'm worried." Luxembourg wrote back.

"That's great." Russia said aloud. "Can you believe it?"

"Yay. Power tools. Never used them before." I muttered.

"Don't worry, I know exactly what to do. I can show you." With that, we all said goodbye and left for our dormitories. What Russia meant by 'help' I would only know the next day.

"And I said "no way!" And left." Japan was in the middle of a funny story. We were in engineering class and Luxembourg was quickly explaining everything to Russia so he'd understand how to help. Luxembourg had a very excited look in his eyes, while everyone

else was uneasily looking around.

"Moral of the story?" I asked Japan.

"Don't eat South Korea's ramen noodles. Even with his permission." Japan flicked her ears towards Russia, who was approaching us. "Hi, what's going on?"

"Power tools," Russia produced a screwdriver out of nowhere and started to affix a piece of metal plate to another. "Luxembourg wants to test them out before using them."

"Somehow, I don't trust you boys with power tools." Japan put her hands on her hips in a commanding way. To stick with her usual unusual style, she was wearing a white shirt with paint spattered all over it and a denim skirt with a black choker necklace on her neck.

"Don't worry, Japan. We're responsible....most of the time," he left her without a word, scooping up his conglomerate metal creation.

"Well," she huffed. The pitter-patter of the rain above was starting to become an intense downpour and the small clashes of thunder could be heard above the steady buzz of the saw that Luxembourg turned on. After a few seconds, we heard a dull thump as a piece of metal fell on the floor and I saw Russia and Luxembourg nod to each other simultaneously.

"Okeeey everyone!" Luxembourg addressed us all. "Power tools. Has anybody used these before?" A few people raised their hands. "Mhmm, you will be broken into partners. I said before, I'm having second thoughts. But what the heck! Let's get going!" He clapped his hands in what we now deem his signature move. "You, with you, aaand you...with you and then Japan, come here, with him. And Russia, you're stuck with Germany. Not that that's bad." He added hastily. "Just you might be hindered if Russia needs to help anyone."

"I'll manage," I shrugged. He just gave me a thumbs up in reply.

"So. These things," he continued, pointing at the tools. "I know you all aren't kids, but pleeeease be careful with these. Britain barely

gave me the green light for these, and if something happens...this class can spiral down to something very, very boring." Everyone nodded seriously. "Okay. So. Good. Now, what I want everyone to do is apply our usage of Kinetic and thermal energy equations along with our calculations from last class. Don't forget, if you cannot use the integral, do an implicit differentiation of your equation instead and then use the inverse. It should come out as an integral. If it doesn't, you have permission to complain to our calculus professor." Some students laughed in the background.

"May we start now?" Russia asked.

"Yes, yes you MAY."

"Thank you." With that, everyone started to quickly scratch out their equations. I turned to Russia who started to leaf through my equations with a frown.

"These yours?" He asked.

"Mm, yeah."

"You sure?" He raised an eyebrow. "I think you can do better, smart boy." For some reason, the way he said that made me blush nervously. He probably didn't notice or didn't let me know that he noticed. "Let's just use mine."

"Okay," I nodded. He wrote down some more calculations and then sighed, punched down numbers in the calculator and looked back at me.

"Never used a power tool?"

"Er, no."

"Eh, there's nothing much," he pointed to the switch. "You switch it on, you adjust the power. Easy. Definitely not implicit differentiation."

"Heh, yeah."

"Okay, if all my calculations are correct...and if this calculator isn't

broken....we should have this by the end. One."

"Okay." I said.

"You have no idea what I'm saying, do you?" He smirked. I sighed and nodded in defeat.

"I don't get this," I admitted heavily. "I know the math part. I have the same integral. I just did it though inverse differentiation. But velocity? Momentum and heat transfer equations? No, no. Not mine." He laughed and patted my back.

"Hah," he did the final check over his paper. "Well, let's find out how good this works. Don't ever trust me with a power tool again." The rest of his speech was muffled by the noise of many chainsaws at once. He cut through the pieces like butter and after sometime, through the whole table. "Do you want to try?" He didn't even look down at half of the table being cut clean off.

"Ummm. I guess..." I said nervously. "I've never don't his before."

"Can you hold this?" He checked, lightly lifting it up. I thought since he had no problem doing it, so should I. Bad idea. The thing weighed about of me and Russia laughed as I tried to just hold it up.

"No. I can't." I shook my head and put it on the ground. Luxembourg came up to us, his gaze quickly scanning our mess and waved over to Russia.

"RUSSIA!" Luxembourg yelled over the din. I thought it must've been because of the table. But no, he didn't bat an eye about half of the table falling off. "Go over there! Help that group, please."

"Sorry, Germany," he skipped over to two lost looking guys that couldn't even find the power plug on the table. While he explained to the other group, I managed to use a manual screwdriver to fix two of the pieces together. When he came back, he was surprised.

"Oh," he looked at my 'progress'. "You helped," he joked.

"I need to do something!" I crossed my arms.

"Okay, okay." He gestured to the cleanly cut table. "Then help me fix this. Since we're way ahead." We spent the next half hour taping back the cut wires and hardware. The whole time we talked, pretty loudly over the noise, about our future. And it seemed that we both came felt like we had to break out of a box, and that we didn't feel like we belonged in this aristocratic society.

"Great job, everyone! Nobody died or cut themselves, good!" Luxembourg was ecstatic. "Next time, we try again."

"He's going crazy," Japan commented. "I almost got my ears cut off by my stupid partner!"

"Suit yourself," Russia smiled. "I had a good class, right Germany?"

"Sort of." I half shrugged.

"Hmm, angry that you don't understand most of it?"

"Maybe. But I can't do it."

"You can. Now you know my feeling in English." His attitude and speech towards me became softer and kinder. I wondered what happened, but I started to feel like I understood him more. He wasn't a cold and angry person that he looked like. I just probably caught him at the wrong place and time. Maybe it was just that we were different in what we liked and what we were comfortable with. But at the same time, so alike, with our pasts, how we view the world and who we feel indebted to.

"Indeed I do." I nodded, using his commonly spoken phrase. He laughed at that, noticing my words. I guessed that it was the day of figuring out how we really felt towards each other and how much we really knew.

Thawing

[image]

"No, Russia," Iceland groaned as we prepared for the day. He already was in a bad mood, because he smashed his head against the ceiling or the bottom of my bed when he woke up. After a series of rainstorms and soaking weather, came a hard frost that froze everything over. Not only ponds and lakes, but the walkways and the trails across the campus did too. Even though many students lived on campus, rumour had it that U.K. slipped on the ice, fell, broke his cane and swore at the world before decreeing that classes should be cut short that day. Ingenious! That meant I only get tortured for half the time today. And since everything was frozen....why couldn't we go ice skate a little afterward? I told Iceland this idea and maybe between my annoyingly high pitched tone this morning and his headache, he seemed it a horrible scheme. "I don't want to."

"But you're Ice-land." I countered. "You like ice."

"Rush-a," he snapped back. "You speed into ideas way too fast. No thinking."

"No thinking needed," I said pressing my hands to the cold glass of our balcony. "All I'm saying is, do you want to. I'm still going no matter what."

"And who will go with you?" He narrowly missed another chance to bump his head on the desk. He was busily installing a portable heater. Our room didn't have a good one, since we were the last room on the floor, and heat didn't travel that far from the main heat grid.

"Somebody," I out onto the beautiful frozen landscape. It was brilliant. No snow, all ice. That ensured me smooth ice without

little lumps that give me such a hard time.

"Somebody crazy," he moaned.

"Okay, don't go. Just stop moaning."

"Now I have to!" He whined. "Finland just texted me. He said that him and his roommate are going. Ugh, now I'm obliged to go." Ah, but he was smiling. I could see it through the reflection in the glass. I saw through his vice. We usually did this. He would complain about something that he didn't necessarily love, but liked, and would moan about how horrible it was. Time to stop this little trick.

I looked at him with exasperation. "Really, Iceland? Really?" In a few seconds, his fake saddened expression was filled with laughter.

"Did you fall for it?" He asked gleefully.

"A little. Did you actually hit your head, or is that a lie too?"

"No, I actually did." When he said that, I came up and lightly tapped the place where he hit it. The reaction was immediate.

"Ow!" He hissed. "What was that for?"

"To see if you're not lying," I said innocently. "You can't lie to me twice."

"You're no fun, Russ," he shook his head. "Too serious."

"Sorry. I'm always like that." I opened our balcony door a little and the cold wind gutted in. "What classes do you have today?"

"Stupid drama, stupid biology, stupid Spanish language, stupid Algebra and stupid elective course that I don't even like." He listed them all with his favourite prefix word.

"You hate all of those?" I asked. "Really?"

"No, really. I do. Especially biology. I have the same professor two blocks in a row." He said simply. "What's your schedule for today?"

"English, ew. Then German language, then Calculus, then Physics and Engineering." I listed off my timetable for today. "Shortened classes though."

"No. They cut off in the middle of your third class." Iceland corrected. "So you'd only have English, German and half of Calculus."

"That's really dumb. Why do they do that?"

"Who knows, to torture you, I guess!" He laughed. "Anyway, let's get going."

"To eat?"

"Where else?"

"I have food. I'm eating here today." I crossed over to the kitchen and opened the cupboard. When we both came here, the pantries were all empty. But the day before yesterday, Professor France called me to pick up a rather large package from my father. She said that at first, she didn't recognise the writing, since it was written in a different alphabet, but then she figured it might be Russian. I admire her powers of the process of elimination and deduction. Inside there was a letter, and obviously food and blankets. I still don't have the heart to throw away food so I put it in my cupboards. Now was a great time to eat it. I felt both lazy and the fear of slipping on the ice because of being in a hurry.

"Can you share then?" Iceland took off his scarf and earmuffs that he just put on.

"Gladly," I waved him into our tiny kitchen. Iceland called it a kitchenette, but it was almost a room, so we naturally had to have a big argument about rooms and flats and furniture. "There's a rich variety of tasty canned meat, oats and grains."

"Tasty isn't a good word for your 'variety', Russ." Iceland shook his head at the assortment of breakfast that I offered.

"If you don't want any, you are welcome to go and slide your way down to the hall. I'm sure you definitely won't break your spine."

"On second though, all of this looks absolutely delicious," Iceland said quickly. "Especially your meat."

"Best of all, you can eat it cold." I took a can opener and haphazardly cut through the metal to open it. The brown and grey mass slipped onto the plate with a sickening squelch. Iceland looked disgusted and taken aback, but he said nothing. I grabbed two forks, shoved one in his hand and started to eat from the plate in the middle of us.

"Hey, where's mine?"

"Iceland, it's time you learned Communism." I pointed to the plate. "Here is the Communal Food Bowl. We eat from the same one."

"Ew, Russia, ew." He sighed, but steadily ate the cold meat with me. It was definitely not the best tasting stuff in the world. On the contrary, I would've liked some potatoes and tomatoes with the cold meat, but aside from that, the saltiness made me grab a glass of water and fill it from the tap. Iceland quickly put a stop to that.

"Don't drink that." He warned.

"Why not?" I spilled it down the drain.

"Here it is time you learned Capitalism," he snickered. "We have to buy water in bottles. The water in the tap has lead flecks in it."

"What!? Buy water! First of all, I don't have that kind of money, and Second, for all that crying of 'oh no, we're destroying the earth with our nuclear bombs and emissions' they are making us use plastic bottling! How un-green!"

"No offense Russ, but I don't think you care that much about being green. And you're right. I didn't want to cut in the middle of your rant, but there is a water dispenser at the beginning of our hall. You can just get water there."

"Seriously?" I sighed. "I'll wait then."

"Suit yourself." He stood up and was about to leave.

"Get me one!" I shouted as he closed the door.

"Get it yourself!" He shouted back, but came in three minutes with two bottles. They were hard plastic and had names on them.

"See how green they are?" Iceland pointed to the names etched on the bottles. "You have to reuse them."

"Uh huh," I said sceptical. I still thought that having lead in water was a bad idea. What if somebody swallowed it. Not that I particularly cared, but what if I swallowed it. I'm egotistical, deal with it.

"Well, thank you for your 'Russian Meal' I...enjoyed it."

"Don't lie, you hated it. You're just lazy. And it's not Russian, more like my father's 'I am in the Army and I can't be picky' meal. He thinks I'll mix it with buckwheat. Nice try on his part, but I'll never ever touch 'Kasha Greek Style'."

"Sounds sickening." He shuddered. "Well, have a good day. As much as English will let you."

"I'll try." And with that, I whisked away our plate and forks, rinsed them under scalding water and left, taking my coat and books. Now I knew why my father used hot water. It eliminates most of the bacteria without using soap. With his situation, we didn't have much soap. With mine, I was too lazy and in a rush. How different my life must be now. I didn't have neighbours who robbed my clothing and I had soap. All I had to do was get good marks. What a life!

Ten minutes into English, I realised that I would trade in kleptomaniac neighbours for Mr. UK's snoozefest of a class. We were analysing 'Water on the Wood' again. Whoever wrote this book must've had such a boring life and such a limited imagination that they had to write out page by page how the character, named 'Claude' decides that he needs to get away from his family. The only way to do that is...no not run away or hide or forget them. No, it's to murder them. I know it sounds interesting, but trust me, it's not. He stops before he kills his wife. Then they all live happily ever

after with their horrific PTSD and never forget that their father/ husband tried to murder them. The end, comments by Russia. The worst part is that there's no action. All thought and trying to figure out what his mind is doing. We were with partners again, like we were for the last six classes in a row. But I guess it was fine, since Germany understood that I didn't understand anything. He did most of the notes and explained a lot to me. It didn't make me love the book a pinch more, but I felt glad that he helped me along.

"Soon we'll be done with this book," he announced today, flipping through the pages. There were about eighty left. To me it looked like eight hundred.

"If you say so."

"Do you really find this boring?" He asked. "Or difficult? Isn't there a Russian book similar to this called Crime and Punishment?"

"First of all, Crime and Punishment is a classic novel. I have to read it. Second, it's in Russian, and third, Raskolnikov actually committed a murder. There's the intrigue. In this one, the guy doesn't do anything, he skips work to wander in the woods like a depressed homeless man, he talks to himself, and to top all of this off, the language they use is unnecessary. I'm already struggling with English and now they give me words like Obsequious and Idyllic."

"Well, obsequious means obeying or paying attention to someone with excess or servitude. And Idyllic means-,"

"Do you know how many of those words I have?" I asked, nevertheless writing down his definition of the word. "I have a whole list. I can give it to you."

"Sure, I'll look it over." He wrote down some stuff for 'our' analysis and looked back up at me. "Are you going to go skate this afternoon. Finland texted Iceland, his brother and asked him if you guys are going."

"Yes, I am." I bent over my very poorly written paper and decided to wing my explanation, writing down as many dumb and convoluted

ideas as possible. I was being very feckless at the moment. "Can you skate well?"

"Somewhat. I can stand, stop and sort of push off. The basics." He took my paper and with a smile told me. "You don't get a word of what this says, do you?" It was almost word for word my phrase back in our Engineering class. How did he remember that?

"Well, plainly, I can't do English," I smiled.

"We all have our weaknesses," he said softly.

"But we can overcome them." I whispered. He looked back at me with surprise. He then smiled back at me, trying to suppress it into a frown. We stayed like that for a moment till I figure I must ruin it. "And I can overcome this by copying off of yours."

"No way, Russia," he whisper yelled. "I said I'd do most of it, but not all of it!"

"Oh come on," I begged, getting closer to him. "Just this time,"

"Uh, no." He pushed my face back lightly with the tip of his pen. "How will you appreciate the wonderful world of 'Water on the Wood' then?" He said, sarcastically.

"I would rather not," I fiddled with my pen till it fell out of my hand. Germany facepalmed and retrieved my writing utensil with a sigh. "The book is rather dull."

"Illuminating, would be a better word,"

"Don't tell me you actually like this book."

"I do."

"I do not."

"I don't think anybody cares," he remarked. "Either way, we won't be doing anymore modern fiction for a while. I think Mr. UK said that we'd be doing classical English literature next. Now if you think this is boring, I don't know what to tell you about Classical

English."

That made me perk up a little. "Oh, that's better. I actually like Shakespeare."

"You do?" He said dryly. "I thought you told me..."

"I've read classics. Those at least have action in them. Somebody does something!"

"Oh boy," Germany shook his head. "How can you be satisfied with a book?"

"I'm picky. What can I say."

"Hopefully you're not too picky with people like you are with books." He looked uncomfortable when he said that. I didn't know what he meant, so I shrugged.

"A little. I know who I like and who I don't."

I literally wrote the whole chapter today. This will have to be broken into two chapters since it will get long. A lot more of these feelings between our main characters will start to arise.

Breaking Ice

[image]

The rest of the day went by quickly. Even quicker than I expected. Slovenia felt chatty in our German class and did most of the work for everyone and even did all of the homework before class ended and shared the answers. Why she was in such a mood today, nobody knew. I even forgot that classes were cut short and I asked our Calculus professor, Greece, why we were going out early.

"Half-day," she said, erasing the whiteboard. "Forgot?" A smile played on her lips.

"Oh, yeah," I stammered. "But, I still need help on these..."

"On infinite sequences?"

"Specifically convergence and divergence behaviours."

"Hmm, we'll see. Try this," she waved to the board. On it she wrote down some simple equations. After a few minutes, she explained how to figure it out. "Russia, maybe you should be taking Multivariable Calculus. It is for the engineering track. Maybe you would be interested? This does seem pretty easy for you. We don't go over Infinite Sequences till May..."

"That would be nice," I conceded.

"Yes, since Calculus 2 isn't really a good match for you. I can void the selection and get you into a higher level. I'm sure they haven't gone over much. The professor likes to take it slowly." She typed fast on her computer and then took a bowl of Dolmades and olives and ate in front of me. I got the feeling that she didn't care that I

was plainly staring at her or that olive juice was running down her chin and onto her blouse. Greece was a woman of comfort and cared more about her well being and easement than what she looked like. Most of the time she ate in front of the class and her stylish white blouses would have stains by the end of the class. She always managed to get them cleaned though. She liked gold, and had several thick gold bracelets around her blue arms and I noticed a thin chain around her neck with a crucifix on her neck, a little fancier than mine.

"Okay, thank you."

"Have a good rest of the day," she waved back and settled down to eat her meal. I went down the light bathed hall of the mathematics centre which was more glass than concrete. It was generally a quiet and sophisticated place, and the only sound being my footsteps, which I tried to lighten. Coming out, I carefully avoided the sidewalks and pathways, and walked on the other side of the hedgerows. I spotted some students imitating me and some falling down on the icy pavement. It took me two tries to unlatch the lock from the college door. Even the little stairwell leading up to my floor felt frozen. I quickly went to my room and found Iceland unpacking some beaten skates.

"Hi Russ," he greeted me. The blast of hot air hit my face as I entered. He managed to keep it plugged in the whole time. "I found my hockey skates." He brandished the red and blue skates. The blade looked pretty smooth, but the laces were grey and worn, and a word in Icelandic was written across his left boot.

"What does 'elskan' mean?"

"What!" He looked down at his boot and sighed. Apparently it wasn't a good one. "It means baby. Seriously, Sweden probably wrote it. In permanent marker no less. I'm taping that up." He took a piece of duct tape and wrapped it around his boot. "Do you have skates?"

"Indeed." I said, taking out a pair.

Iceland looked at me with scepticism. "Figure skates."

"So what?"

"Figure skates."

"And? I left my hockey ones back at home. Sorry. These are better anyway. My ankle rotates less in them."

"Please," he huffed. "I thought you'd be more manly."

"Does having hockey skates make you manly?" I challenged. "At least I have toepicks. The good kind." I showed him my Graf grade platinum picks. He seemed unimpressed. "Hey, they're black at least! And they're Riedells. My younger brother still has those white skates."

"At least," he muttered. "Can you do something on them?"

"Of course! I can skate!"

He shook his head. "No. I mean like jump or spin."

"Yes, I can."

"I don't know figure skating moves or anything, but you have to show me. I know the difference between good and bad."

"Okay." I replied, putting the skates in a leather bag. Iceland took his 'hockey stick' which was just a piece of wood attached to another piece of wood. Seriously? Was his puck a square piece of metal then? I put on relatively lighter clothing, a black turtleneck with black slacks that had a Velcro strap at the end to keep them from waving in the wind. "Coming, Ice-land?"

He was fidgeting with his huge bag. "Coming Rush-a."

"Let's go." I didn't even wait for him and went down the hall. He took the elevator down with all of his stuff and lugged it down into the courtyard.

"Finland said that they'll be behind the campus. It's a lake without too many people."

"Good. I don't like crowds. Especially on ice."

"Germany is coming too."

"I know that. He told me."

"Does he even know how to skate?" Iceland asked.

I shrugged in response. "Who knows? I might help him out, but he better realise that I brought music, which means I'm not going to move at one metre per hour." He laughed in response.

"You guys made up I see," he mused.

"Yeah, turns out he's not so bad," I acknowledged. "Yes, he is a big nerd, but he's pretty funny as well. And he can listen, without making faces." I pointed at him while he smirked.

"Somebody likes someone." He sang.

"I do not."

"Yes, you do."

"Prove it." I huffed. He kept on arguing with me till we got to the lake. It was perfect, if there can be a word to describe it. Not a stroke of imperfection or mound of snow or any sort of thing sticking out from under the ice. I noticed Finland and Germany on the other side, tying their skates. We walked up to them and Finland looked up.

"Tervetuloa,"

"Hi Finland." Iceland waved back. "How's the ice?"

"Stable.Thick." He said. "Estonia said he wants to come. I said to him that we will divide the rink into a hockey rink and the rest is for ballet on ice."

"Ballet on ice," Iceland drawled. "Russia is going to be doing that."

"So?" Finland grunted, tightening his skate. It was way newer and

looked just bought. "His choice. I would figure skate if I could. It's nice, don't be so rude, Iceland."

Iceland's eyes rounded. "You're defending him?"

"I'm not defending anyone. I'm just saying, don't be rude. We all know what your favourite thing to do is..." Finland left off with an evil smile.

"Nei Finnland..." He begged. "Please....takk."

"Haha," Finland stood up and stretched, now he was even taller thanks to the skates. "I'll never forget that Iceland. I have whole power over you."

"No fair!" He sat down on the cold ground and started to tie his skates.

"Hi Russia!" Germany said to me when the Nordic brothers finished their argument.

"Hello,"

"Isn't this great? I haven't skated on a lake in so long!"

"Yeah, me too. But that's because my grandfather ruins it all the time. He keeps telling me how I might fall under the ice and drown."

"But the ice is almost a metre thick," he countered.

"Doesn't matter to him, just to scare us." I said. I had to take off my gloves to tie my laces. So that my heel didn't slip in the boot, I had to tighten the skates very hard.

"I like your skates," Germany looked at the brand. "Hmm, I thought you'd have Edea."

"I wish." I sighed. "I used to. Edea skates are very expensive. They also don't break in. I have this navicular bone on the side of my foot that presses against the inside and it hurts after an hour. The real leather also is very cold, and my feet froze by the end of my

practice. But I mostly hated them because of the pain."

"Oh," he went on. "Okay, I have these. They're actually my dad's. A little small, but I fit." He showed me the black brushed skates. They were certainly vintage. Minimal scratches and shiny Mark II blades showed that they were used to sitting in a closet rather than being used. The nice overall look was ruined by some white spots near the toe and a 'DR' etched on the heel. It looked like Germany tried to hide the initials with tape. I offered him a piece of black skate tape from my bag. He had relief stamped all over his face, when I didn't give him a reaction.

"Coming?" I asked when I finished.

"I'm almost done."

"Okay, I just need to warm up."

"Go ahead," I stepped off the ground and did a couple of stroke tracks. Iceland tried to race me until I did a mohawk and flipped to go backwards. After that, he stopped tailing me. After being sufficiently warm, I did a couple of waltz jumps, a loop waltz combination jump and then a single axel. I was comfortable enough on these skates to do harder jumps. Before, I didn't tell my father that I had foot pain and he made me go harder, and landing on my right foot was horrible. When I went on an inside edge, I could feel a pulsing pain. I didn't ever reveal my secret until I landed a double axel on the wrong edge, an inside edge. I crumpled like rocks. Nothing happened to me, but I did lie in bed for two days. After that, my father gave the top notch professional skates and traded them for Riedell Silver Stars. I couldn't wish for better ones. They broke in and it fit my foot perfectly. It gave me back my joy of freestyle skating. I almost took up ice dance to not injure my foot.

"You skate really good," I heard Germany's voice in the background. He was standing awkwardly near me, decked in a thick coat, mittens, a scarf and earmuffs. I must've looked scantily dressed in my thin turtleneck, sports jacket and gloves. "I wish I could jump."

"Can you do anything else?"

"I can spin. On two feet."

"At least you can recreational skate." I encouraged him. "Some of my friends can't even stand on ice." He cracked a small smile.

"I guess you're right."

"Indeed I am." I skated out to start a spin. Something sweet and simple. Starting from backward crossovers, I did a small entrance and swung my leg around to make a flying camel spin. I didn't do it perfectly, and I heard my father's stern voice in my head saying to straighten my free leg, but I finished the spin by a simple back scratch. Germany seemed impressed.

"That was great,"

"Thank you."

"How long have you been skating?" The generic question slipped out of his mouth.

"Let me count. Let's see...I started at age four. So...that would be fourteen years now."

"Wow. That's a lot."

"I'm not the best, but I can do most of the things."

"I think you're pretty good," he said, tugging at his earmuffs. "I'm not. I started to skate when I was nine. And that was just because my dad wanted me to."

"If it weren't for my father, or wouldn't do anything," I conceded. "So I always thank him for yelling at me to do stuff. It always gives back, my hard work." When I turned around my older brother, Estonia, was skating towards us on very familiar skates.

"Hi!" He chirped. "Hey Russia, I thought you'd be playing hockey with the insane group over there," he pointed over to Finland and Iceland, who was being flattened by his older brother. Finland kept scoring goal after goal, with no hindrance. "If I go over there, he'll make me count his goals. That means that I don't get to skate and I

freeze." He was dressed in a white jacket that was thinner than Germany's, but thicker than mine. He did a couple of complicated three turn and bracket sequences, followed by a haircutter spin and then slid gracefully on the ice like a seal. "Ta-da!"

"Yay," I clapped. Germany giggled in the background.

"What can you do, Russia?" He asked, shaking the snow off of himself.

"What can't he do." Germany turned towards Estonia. I did a couple waltz jumps, then a single axel, then a loop loop combination to get going. I tried a successful double flip and an almost successful double Lutz, and a very good triple salchow double loop combination. I finished off with a double and a half axel, and went into a not great eye spin and finally, a beilmann spin. I thought, for months without practice, I did good. No triple axels or flips, but still. I certainly didn't feel as flexible.

"That was really good!" Estonia nodded.

"Just good?" I gasped, breathing heavily.

"Could do better, I've seen you do better. Where's your triple axel?"

I shook my head. "It's dead now. Dormant, is a better word, actually."

"Hah, you did it on your old ones. Speaking of which, I have them on right now!"

"You can have them. Father took the Pattern 99s off. And then attached them to his own skates. You have very nice Ultima blades on those, mind you." I smirked.

"So you give me the fancy boot and the bad blades. I'd rather have the opposite." Estonia said.

"ESTI! You came! Come on down here to count goals!" I heard Finland's yell from down the lake.

"Esti has taken a vacation from counting goals!" Estonia screamed

back. His voice was too high pitched to properly yell, so it would turn into more of a screech.

"Come on! I'll force you then!"

"NEVER!!!" Estonia disappeared in a flash going the opposite direction. "I will never count goals again! I hate hockey and goal counting!"

"Come here Viro! You will never escape goal counting!"

"What. Just. Happened." Germany said slowly.

I shrugged in reply. "Don't know, don't care."

"All about you I see?" He joked.

"How else?" I offered to go around the lake slowly. He took the offer as coolly as if I asked to dance. We went around, away from Finland's 'Prism of Insanity' Germany dubbed it. We talked mostly on simple and trivial things.

"What's your favourite colour?" He asked me.

"Hmm, white?"

"White? I thought it would be red." He was surprised.

"Is your favourite colour gold?" I looked down at him. He seemed to be processing what I said, and then understood.

"Wow, Russia." He sighed and I laughed. "But seriously, it's actually purple."

"Interesting, not a lot of purple likers. I generally hear blue or red. Or sometimes green and orange. Green is nice, calming. But not my favourite. My father's favourite is gold, actually. He says it's the colour of hard work, also known as money."

"My father's favourite colour was pink, believe it or not." Germany admitted.

"Really? Pink?"

"Really. But he'd never tell anyone. If anybody asked, he'd snap at them and say 'favourite colour? I don't have time to figure out my favourite colour! Blue I guess' and each time he would call out a different colour. But I think he liked pink because it is a cooperative colour, one that relaxes and calms. He didn't have that, and he wanted it." He looked up at the sky. He breezy winds moved the clouds tactically, and in a fluid manner. There were little patches here and there, where the sun would come through, but mostly, it was a grey even mass, moving across the sky.

"I guess we all want something. Gold, peace or time." I said simply. "Problems are everywhere. And they lurk in the darkest corners. We all think and wish that our problems are the worst and that there cannot be anything worse. There can. And if you do live out the worst, you know that problems are all made up."

"You think so?" He looked up at me with his amber gaze. Spellbinding, like his pupils were tiny insects trapped in the ancient sap of a tree. Forever. "You think that I'm not...not my father?"

"I know so." I whispered back. "You aren't. Leave that shadow behind, unlike countless others. I've realized that you aren't so bad. Know it all, maybe, but not vengeful."

"As, thanks." He said back. "Except for the know it all thing. I am not."

"Really? Are you sure? Who likes Water on the Wood?"

"You aren't ever going to let that book go, are you?"

"Never." I grabbed his hand playfully and skated on, to what I felt would be a brighter and less shadowy future. The sky was turning the beautiful pink that Germany described, with the clouds being drenched in the rays of the dying...no not dying. That was a horrible word. No. The sky was painted in elegant brush stokes of light pink and deep magenta as the sun prepared to dip down into its nightly slumber. And all I thought about was pink.

Tervetuloa - welcome

Nei Finnland - No Finland

Takk - please

Viro - Estonia

I have some figure skating jargon here. Hopefully they aren't very confusing!

On Good and Evil

[image]

When the November winds were replaced with December snow, it enveloped the land in a deathly silence. The winter brought the earth into a sweet slumber from which only the most desperate awoke, to find food and warmth in the beautiful and silent white world. Russia called it that. He said that 'deathly' was too harsh of a word, and that winter was just the time when the earth goes to sleep, to work the next three quarters of the year. An interesting notion. He could be very smart when he wanted to be. I was currently sitting with him outside, in Pine College, where the trees would provide cover from the winds. It was the evening after the time we ice skated together on the lake behind the campus. Since that time, we've been talking with a less tense air, and I've learned a lot about him, some surprising and some not. He was busily flipping though a book before I flipped my schedule before his face.

"Do you take a culture credit?" He asked when I showed him my timetable for class.

"Yes, philosophy."

"Wait, really?" His eyes darted across the paper quickly until he found it. "I thought that Culture was like language...."

"It is," I agreed. "But it's also Literature, Ideology, Visual Arts and Historical Studies."

"Hmph, that's a new definition then."

"I guess. We also need an arts credit."

He growled in response. "Three, actually."

"Oh, so we actually need...nobody even told me. I got my information from a student."

"I asked U.K. what we have to complete. We need five mathematics credits, Five English, four Culture, three Arts, three science and one 'seminar'."

"What is seminar?"

He shrugged. "Probably a boring course where we have to talk. And these span through our whole four years actually. How about Majoring? I heard those take a certain amount of hours."

"Have you thought of a major?" I already knew his answer before I asked my question.

"Of course! Engineering and Calculus, but I'm going to minor in German Language."

"Minor?"

"Small degree. A major requires more dedication, a minor is just an extra cherry on the plate."

"Don't you mean 'extra cherry on top'?"

"Yes, that. I'm bad at comparing, you know that." He sighed. I stifled a small laugh. The frozen landscape all turned white when December rolled around. And even though the pressure started to come because of the looming midterm exams, they were only in late January. But I still started to rewrite my notes and look them over. Practice makes perfect. "What Arts courses are you taking?"

"I'm going to take Visual Arts next semester. I want to see how I fare."

"Anything else?" He looked out onto the woody area, fiddling with his sleeves. "Because I dropped Orchestra. I hate my violin very much. I'm to be taking Drama starting tomorrow. That will be fun...not."

"Now that you told me that we have to take three..." I groaned. "I have to take Visual Arts, something else and something else."

"Eh, I decided to do Drama, Dance and I requested a piano class.

Nobody else wants to do it."

"I don't see you in drama," I joked.

"Better than Painting. I won't get dirty at least."

"I think I'll take painting. Sculpting and I'll figure something else out."

"Suit yourself. Drama and Dance might be stupid, but at least it's stupidity with movement. I've done ballet before."

"You've done?" I said. "Past tense?"

"Yes, it's more of a floor practice for me. Anyway, only my grandfather can prance around a stage with graciousness."

"How about your father?"

"What about him? He does it, enthusiastically and nicely but he's not my grandfather. Not light, you know. His last performance was caught on tape, and that's when he crashed though the floor. It was funny until you saw his face. He was angry and embarrassed and he vowed to never do it again. Well, not publicly."

"Oh, that must've hurt."

"His ego, definitely. Not physically, though. It wasn't that bad." He assured me. "He is a very good Ice Dancer. He's been competing for a while. Too tall for jumping and freestyle."

"I see." I really didn't. I just wanted to make small talk. Russia, as I found out, could be talkative if he knew you. And he would talk about what you wanted.

"So you have a philosophy next school day?" He asked, standing up and rubbing his arms from the cold.

"Yes,"

"Okay. Tell me how it goes. I'm interested." That was his goodbye. Another thing I noticed is that he ended the conversation.

Sometimes abruptly. That might sound controlling, but I understood. Or maybe I just wanted to understand that.

"Bye!" I called to him.

"Oh, till tomorrow!" I heard his voice in the distance. Sighing, I trudged out of Pine College and walking back. Tomorrow, I felt, would be a tiring day.

I never realised that I would have to think so much in philosophy...and fear for my own safety, either. We didn't get much done, I was more of a sit around and think sort of class. The class was actually held in the basement of the culture building. It was a dingy sort of room, with no windows and an old fashioned table setup, where three large tables could seat about four students at each, facing the old looking blackboard. There was only one lamp, on a string in the middle of the room, hanging from a simple wire. We didn't have that many people. About nine or so. Many of them were all occupied in staring at me. Probably thinking of if I will also start a murder spree.

At first, it went well. The professor, a dreamy looking woman was named Andorra. She wore a dark blue blouse with little yellow and white stars on it, and a long and light white skirt. An intricate flower headband was her only accessory. She said that she was a philosophy student professor and that we were her third class ever to be taught. The outline of the course didn't seem to be too hard and Andorra seemed nice, but she started off our actual class very wrong.

"So everyone, what I'd like to start of with is a notion." She was a soft spoken quiet woman. I strained to hear her speech. She scratched out her notes on the blackboard. "Good. And evil." Silence met her words. Even though I didn't turn around, I knew that everyone was staring. At me. I tried to only look at Andorra, and for now, my scheme worked. "So, any ideas?"

"Good is when you do something good." A student offered.

"What you do makes you good or bad." Somebody else said. "If you like, kill people, you are bad. If you help, you are good." I did *not* like where this conversation was going.

"Aha, so actions are what determine this good/evil outcome," Andorra was either blind, deaf or both. Literally everyone was whispering behind my back. She didn't even bat an eye when a girl whispered "how can we be so trusting and sit in a class with the son of a murder who doesn't even care that his father killed so many people?" It's not that I didn't care! It's just that it makes a bad introduction starter. 'Hi I'm Germany. By the way, my father's a dictator who marched people to their deaths. How was your day?' Seriously, I understand, but for an liberal arts and integration school, they have to be lighter about it.

Andorra shot an arrow though my thoughts. "Okay, now. We'll spit up into partners and discuss these ideas on the board." She wrote down a numbered list of ideas and looked around the class. Too bad for the last person, Croatia, who was stuck without a partner. "Croatia, why don't you discuss with Germany?"

"Okay," as if he was asked to go pick cranberries in a windy lightning storm, he moped to me with his things and sat down heavily next to me. His greyish blue eyes were reproachful as he looked me up and down. He had a red jacket on and didn't take it off, even if it was relatively warm in the class. His hands kept travelling to his neck, clutching his jacket's zipper. As the class started to talk, Croatia avoided my gaze and only when I spoke did he shudder slightly and his voice sounded cracked and shaky.

"So...ideas?" I tried to get him to talk. He suddenly snapped out of his trance and looked at me fearfully.

"Sorry?" He whispered. Again, his hands automatically crawling to his neck.

"Ideas," I was already getting annoyed. I didn't want to show that I was, since that would make Croatia freeze with fear.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he squeaked. "Yes, yes...um, well....good means um....charity and kindness...and um...evil is....ah.....umm....well...I

don't know." He rounded his eyes and then looked quickly away. I guessed that I had to do the work this time. How I wished that I had Russia here with me. At least he wouldn't cower in fear and he might have interesting ideas. Too bad he was busy dancing.

"Okay, well, how about 'does knowing the balance between good and evil affect your choices'?"

"Sorry?" He said quietly again, as if I had waved a hand in front of his face. His eyes would repeatedly glaze over and he would stare into space. Only when I spoke did he come back into reality.

I had to ask him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He immediately lied.

"Okay then. What about 'do we chose between good and evil? How do we know what's best for us?' Croatia?" I tapped the desk so he would get back in touch with reality.

"Well....Okay, um we can choose because we know that good is...what we're supposed to do. And evil...not. Because we get punished for it in the end. Whether in life or after life."

"Interesting." Not. It is so hard to fish out an answer from him. And I can't even show that I'm annoyed, because then we'll get less work done. Fortunately for both of us, Andorra concluded the lesson and gave us an assignment to come up some of our own questions...with our partners. I heard a thump next to me and saw Croatia slide from his chair, clearly unconscious. He fainted. Andorra seemed unconcerned and just dragged him to her chair and fanned his face till he regained his consciousness.

"Don't forget! Please ask your partners to come up with questions...Oh no, Croatia!" This time he groaned and fell to the floor, crying. And of course, not only did my class see this, but everyone else in the hallway. Some were horrified, others thought it was funny and one girl even came up to ask if everything was okay. He looked at her with a desperate manic glint in his eyes.

"NO, NOTHING IS OKAY!" Croatia screamed. "I'M ALWAYS STUCK

WITH SOME IDIOT OR MONSTER! WHY ME?!" He ran down the hall, sobbing and gasping for breath. Andorra, acting as cool as the weather outside shepherded her next class in and waved to me.

"Bye Germany, have a nice rest of the day," she shut the door behind her. As if nothing had happened. Now I had to do the homework assignment on my own. I didn't even feel like thinking about it. Since it was the break in between classes for me I walked over the salt and sand covered sidewalks and onto a little path that only had footsteps in it, though which I jumped to not get my feet wet. I actually wanted to go to the library, but with Croatia's scene in the hallway, I felt like gossip spread like wildfires here. To plainly speak, I would be in the obvious centre of attention there. I walked in a defeated manner towards my uncle's office when I saw somebody coming out. He didn't notice me yet. The ever present slight frown, grey ushanka and light purple eyes with their worried look. Russia. He was holding a binder in one hand and the door with the other.

"Oh, hello Germany," he smiled when he saw me. When I didn't answer he cocked his head and pointed to the door. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes...no," I switched my lie around midway. I figured that I trusted him enough. "Do you have a free period?"

"Yes," he nodded. "It just started. I needed to file something at the office," he answered my second question before I asked it. "Need something?"

"Not anymore." I sighed, and he walked back with me.

"What's wrong?" He asked, stretching his hand out but then left it hovering at my shoulder not sure whether or not to draw it away.

"Ah, I had that philosophy class today. How was Drama?"

His eyes lit up. "And, how did it go? I'm going to have Drama next period, actually."

"Well, fine at first. Then...not. Our teacher is a dreamy cloud who

doesn't seem to notice that everyone is just staring at me. And then, she split us into partners to discuss...guess what, good and evil! My partner was Croatia, and he just didn't do anything. He was afraid of me,"

"Croatia, yeah he's a jumpy person. His policy is to run or faint, usually. But it's an interesting notion. What did Croatia do, lose consciousness?"

"Exactly what he did." I replied grimly. "Then, our professor assigned us homework to do with our partners!" Russia found a bench to sit on and waved me over. I sat next to him and recited the next part of my story. "Then, he fainted, woke, and then screamed out that he is always put with monsters and idiots or something like that.."

Russia cracked an involuntary smile. "Ah, he snapped. That shouldn't be funny, but go on. I know Croatia a little. He's always stuck with somebody he doesn't want. And he gets sour about it too. He bottles his emotions."

"So now I'm stuck with double homework!" I finished, burying my face in my hands. They were ice cold and I didn't stay like that long. "Because Croatia thinks I'm some sort of monstrosity."

"What is the homework?" He said calmly.

"Questions about good and evil."

"That should be easy for you!" He laughed. "You're a thinker. You should like this homework."

"It's a two person job." I sighed. "Croatia won't even talk to me."

"I can talk to you." He offered. "I might not be a thinker, but I can help."

"Thanks," I said warmly. "I just don't know where to start."

"Well...you can start with a definition. What is Good, what is Evil?"

"Oh, I've never thought of that...well...good is...hmm," I looked up

at him and he smiled.

"Hard is it?"

"Without using those exact words, yes."

"Well...I personally, when I think about it, I don't think evil or good exist. I mean, can you define it? So do they exist? Or is it just a made up notion, something to keep people in line."

"Never thought like that." I took out a pen to write the questions down.

"Or maybe, how do we justify our actions using good and evil. For example you could be doing evil and not knowing it. So it it a crime? Something that people call Banal Evil, the worst kind. And why is it that we always think that 'good' is what we have to do? Do we really have that free will or are we afraid to cross the invisible boundary between supposed Blue and Red."

"How...long have you thought about this?"

"Not long. Just now. Really, don't look at me like that!" He straightened up and crossed his arms. "I really was."

"Those sound really thought out. I didn't even really think about starting with the definition."

"I always do. That's because I don't know many word definitions," he joked. "I speak plainly. Only when I know words do I use them. I've been asking U.K. for lists of words and I just memorize them."

"Oh, that's an interesting way of doing it."

"That's how my father learned English. By just memorizing words and sentences. No higher order thinking needed. Just time and motivation." He leafed though the binder in his hands. Before I could steal a look he snapped it shut before my eyes. "Only for me." He said playfully.

"Aw, can't I see?" I used my whining voice.

"Maybe soon. Not now." He replied cryptically. He placed it in his bag and folded his hands in his lap, looking out again. "To wrap up your philosophical thoughts, I think that each person has this theoretical good and evil inside each of us. There is always a balance. We just choose to show one side of it. Either the good or the bad. Like a mask. We can choose what mask we wear. The good or the bad one. Each day we figure it out. And each night we take it off."

"Sort of an analogy?"

"Yes, quite. I wouldn't get too worked up about it. It's a difficult class. After what you told me, I think that what I chose is a better match for me."

"Do you think I should change mine as well?"

He shook his head in disagreement. "No. You do whatever you want. It's not up to me. If I manipulate your choices you might not be happy with the experience you get. I'm just relating to myself. I cannot sit around and think. I am a man of action. I have to do something, and I have to divert my energy into either practical things or destruction. I took the calmer path." He pushed his ushanka above his brow. "You are, if I'm not mistaken, a man of theory. You can sit and ponder about the issues and ideas of the world and make plans and analogies. What you cannot do sometimes is act. That's where people of action come in. We create the plans that the Theorists make. It's a balance."

"Delicate balance," I conceded.

"Delicate doesn't always mean fragile." He finally looked at me, with his captivating lavender eyes. "Does it?"

"No. It doesn't."

He nodded in response and said nothing for a couple of seconds. "You're very interesting, but you have ideas that surprise me. Sometimes I feel that your quiet intelligence makes you blind to simple things. That's why I'm here. The simple proletariat to guide you." The gong of the clock sounded and he stood up. Turning to

me, he did a quick salute and smiled. "You'll be alright. I know it. Holidays are coming soon and you won't need to worry that much anymore. I have to go now. It was nice to talk."

"Bye Russia."

"Bye Philosopher," he left me without any more words. I didn't turn to my own thoughts till I saw him round the corner. Man of Theory? What did he mean? He wasn't so proletarian if he came up with such complex ideas. Maybe he acted gruffly and cold on the outside, but inside he was understanding, helpful and a listener. An advisor. A heart. A friend.

Drama, and why I'm the Teacher's Pet

[image]

I walked away from Germany feeling glad that I'm not taking his class. I'm glad that my father told me not to, actually. He said that they might try to push politics into discussions. Poor Germany, though. I didn't imagine that he would be the target for such petty gossip. Shameful, he can't even defend himself. What kind of target is that? An easy target, Russia. Oh, well. At least I helped him with his homework. My classes were uneventful till now. Somebody spilled acid all over their shirt in Chemistry and there was a full debate war in our history class about whether or not we need to genetically reproduce an Archaeopteryx to better balance the modern ecosystem. So, basically, we got nothing done. How assiduous, how useful. My next class will definitely help me become a successful engineer. But I'm coming into the class without bias, since I'm too much in a good mood. The class was in the arts centre, and was in the big auditorium. Lucky for me, most of my classes except for sciences and history were comparatively small. When I came in, a girl was dancing in the stage and some other students were either sitting on the stage or on the floor, on their phones. I counted about six people, including me. Good. Not too many to witness my embarrassing moments. I sat down next to another guy on the stage and looked around. Most of the students were older than me, how does that happen all the time, and looked extremely bored.

"Hello my class!" A female voice in back of me trilled. I almost fell off the stage. The voice belonged to Professor France, who was

wearing a black t shirt and a knee length ebony skirt with multicoloured dots on it and pink high heeled shoes and a beret. "How is everyone?"

"Good." The class said more or less enthusiastically.

"Well." I replied. She smiled at my choice of wording.

"Why don't we all introduce ourselves? I'll go first. We'll say our name, our year and what we like about drama, how is that?"

"Sounds good." A student agreed.

"Okay, my name is Professor France, but call me just France, it's easier. I'm your teacher, so yay! And I like drama because I can express emotions and tell a story on stage! Next person?"

A guy stood up in front of us. He was one of the students lying on the ground before, and his eyes looked permanently worried. He smoothed out his tan dress shirt before speaking. "Hi my name is Poland. I'm actually a fourth year. I forgot all about prerequisites. So I thought why not take drama...since it's okay. Better than other courses." He sat back down on the floor, looking flustered. He spoke very fast and had a soprano voice. He seemed to be one of those students who pulled all nighters, got worked up easily and was tired all the time. But Poland. That name rung a bell in my head. Yes, I've heard his name in conversation. Unfortunately, lost in thought, I missed everyone else's presentation till I snapped out and it was my turn.

"Your turn!" France told me.

"Um, my name is Russia. I'm a first year. And I like drama because...truthfully because it's better than Visual Arts and I like to dance."

"Very nice. Thank you all so much for being honest," she nodded in turn to each of us. "And I hope to give you all a class that might make you like drama! So who's ready?" She jumped right into her syllabus without further ado. Her class was all about knowing how drama and theatre worked. As her students, we would be working

with the Theatre Club which put on a production each year. And, as her students, we would be expected to have a lead role. Yay. The play better not be something stupid. "As you all know now, we'll be closely cooperating with the Theatre Club, and those kids will just be there because they want to. You, my little ones, will be the 'professionals' I should say. Because we will be working on this play both with and without them." Little ones. Did she just call a group of university students kids? Two of my classmates were going for a Master's degree next year. I never was called Little. Always the eldest son.

"When will we be meeting? At what times?" Poland asked.

"Depending on the size of your role, you will come from just one a week to five times a week." She explained. "I know you have some important things to do, being in fourth year." She beckoned us to sit in a circle on the stage. The floor was wooden and glossed over with something rubbery. It was clean, unlike floors in my old school.

"So we'll be working on this play the whole time?" A student asked as we sat down. Instead of sitting, she knelt on the ground, preferring to put the pressure on her knees. She looked as old as Poland, but much more confident. She had striking white skin with little nicks and small scarring on her arms but her dark brown eyes glinted in the half light.

"Yes...Israel, we will. But we will also be studying how theatre works, what we do and different vocabularies and memorizations. So, definitely an in depth study of the stage," she swept her arms around her. Israel nodded in understanding and resumed to staring at each person in turn. When she looked at me, I stared back and she turned her head quickly, breaking eye contact.

"What play are we going to do?" Someone else asked.

"Ooh, good question!" France clapped her hands. "I'll tell you next time. I already have copies of the play. Some people here will very much enjoy it!" She was looking at me when she said it. I did tell her before that I was going to take her class, ahead of time. She told me that she'll try to make it interesting, since I admitted that

theatre wasn't my calling.

"So what are we doing today?" Israel questioned again.

"Today is just an introduction," France said, standing up. "But why don't you show me what you guys can do on a stage. I have music, so you can pick something out. I understand that we aren't in dance class, but still. Sing or dance or act something out. You're choice! Who wants to go first?"

"I'll go last," I offered.

"Okay Russia, you can go last,"

"I'll go before Russia," Israel put in.

"I go before Israel," Poland said hurriedly.

"Really guys, and girls?" France huffed. "How about I go first? Eh? And then you sweetheart, Qatar. And then...hmm, you honey. And then you. And then Poland, Israel and Russia, as promised." She smoothed out her skirt and went over to plug in her phone to the main speaker. We all sat down right near the stage, at the first row of seats. Israel started to whisper in Poland's ear and he repeatedly giggled at her words. They were, in fact, quite annoying. I wondered if I twittered like that when I talked.

"No way!" He whisper yelled. "Why? I thought that only Vatican would ever make such a boring project!"

"It's seminar. I'm also taking it. Pretty stupid if you ask me. I should've taken it my first year to get it out of the way. But no, I wanted to get my degree hours. Now I have them, but left out my Arts and Seminar credits."

"Isn't it dumb? It can't be super hard. All you do is like, talk, right?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes we do things, other times we have projects. It isn't even your choice! See I didn't even know I had to take this class. Drama? Seriously, I thought I'd take Oil Painting and beginner music theory and that's it." She hissed back.

"Hush," Poland made a gentle shooing motion. "France is starting." The lights dimmed, all except for the stage. France leaped out and did a series of sweeping arcs with her hands to the slow music. The tone and pitch became louder and higher and her face went from calm to angry. She finished her one minute performance with a singing trill. When the music stopped, we clapped and Qatar whistled. She bowed and let the next person on the stage. Soon all of my classmates went on the spotlight. Poland sang a complicated song, Israel did a little dance and I kept thinking of what I should do.

"Russia! Your turn, come here." France asked me my music preferences. "What kind?"

"Um, something slow. I'll improvise,"

"I love improvisation. Go ahead!" Her eyes sparkled as she scrolled though her music. "Okay, ready."

"Here goes nothing," I muttered. I actually recognised the song, an Italian composition called Goodbye Colonel. I tried to improvise and flow with the music. I could generally create a nice effect with slow music. Usually making up some sort of story as I did it. Mine was losing a lover. After I finished, I got a nice applause from our group.

"Nice job!" Israel told me when I sat back down.

"Thank you,"

"You all were great! Next class I will be passing out the scripts and we'll assign roles! Hmm, sounds good?"

"Yeah," we replied in unison. I didn't realise that each performance took so long. But I guess I came into class late, then we talked and it took time.

"Great! See you next class," she waved at us. As I started to collect my books she came up to me. "Russia, can I talk to you?"

"Of course, ma'am." We crossed over to the end of the stage and she spoke as soon as everyone left. She flipped the switches at the end

of the stage and all the lights came on, very brightly.

"So...I wanted to say, firstly, I liked your performance! It was very nice." She was obviously on to something.

"Thank you."

"Of course," she smiled. "I want to tell you about the play. I will be doing the Queen of Spades production. And I want you to play the lead role." She said it very fast and very suddenly.

"Uh, well...."

She looked at me as if I'd asked to jump off a cliff. "No no, you don't have to! I'm just thinking...you might like it. You seem very...non social, and I wanted you to...have a nice big role." So I was her pet now or something? I didn't mind, since I never was a teacher's pet before. I heard the benefits are great.

"Sure, I could do it. I've read the book."

That seemed to do the trick. "Aw, that's great! Here, let me give you the script. If anyone else wants the role, we'll do a fair try out. But I'll still give this to you." She handed me a glossy New script book. "If you can, you could do some in Russian. That would be interesting. I usually do French or English plays. A change of pace and scenery would be nice."

"Mhmm."

"Well, thank you so much, Russia! And have a great rest of your day. See you next time!" She skipped out of view and into a wing of the stage. She already wrote my name and the character's name, Hermann, on the script. Well, I hope she doesn't mind hopeless singing.

So you're a teacher's pet, huh?" I was in the middle of my meal at the dining hall, with America and Germany. Iceland and Japan would be coming shortly. America was asking me how my class went. "You're my mom's pet."

"I know that." I said irritability pinching my voice. America was nagging me about how did I become his mother's favourite student without doing anything. "I mean, she couldn't have just given you the role for nothing."

"Maybe she wanted somebody who knew Russian? Because it is a Russian play." Germany pointed out. He was keeping silent most of the time, still eating.

"But still...you don't even know her, right?"

"I've talked to her. I warned her that I'm not the best in drama and that I might mess up." I explained. "Maybe she liked my bluntness."

"Maybe...what if-,"

Germany cut him off before he could come up with another accusation. "America, you should be happy for our friend. Not accusing."

"I'm not accusing you. I'm just saying." America fiddled with his fork.

"Okay, okay." I smiled. "I know."

"But she just spontaneously-,"

"America!" We both looked at him in annoyance. He put his hands up in surrender and made an innocent face.

"Sorry, sorry!" He sighed. "I just can't get over it. You? Teacher favourite? And not just any teacher's, my mom's? Impossible."

"Why don't you ask her, then?" I told him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Japan moving deliberately slowly to our table. She wanted to surprise us again. Sorry Japan, I'm in no mood to choke on food today. "Japan and Iceland are here." I announced.

"No fair!" Japan cam up to us, whining. She sat down next to America and Iceland smirked.

"Where's my lover?" He drawled. "I have two pairs and a loner."

"Iceland, hush." Japan flicked both of her ears down.

"Did you know that Russ is my mom's pet?" America couldn't keep his mouth shut, now couldn't he. Germany sighed loudly and shook his head.

Japan and Iceland swirled their heads towards me like snake serpents. "What?"

"I cannot imagine you being one. Germany, yes, definitely. Not you." Iceland said.

"What's your problem with it?" I growled. Now they were rubbing me the wrong way. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing," Iceland said hurriedly, sensing danger. "It's just surprising."

"It better be." I muttered. "I finished anyway." I felt my insides boiling and I thought I might burst out right here. I needed to get out as fast as possible.

"You're leaving?" Japan whined. "We just got here a moment ago. Look, we're sorry. Really."

"No, it's not you. I'm just finished, that's all." It was half a lie. I was finished with my food, so I had no intention of sitting in the stuffy room any longer. "And my mood is ruined. So I don't want to ruin it for everyone else." My mood would not lighten, no matter how much anyone tried. My father would say that only girls do that, but...I've never seen Belarus do it. I guessed only I had amplified emotions. Leaving them there without another word, I ran out of the hall and outside. The cold air hit my face, and I felt myself calm down. After a few deep breaths and watching it rise up like smoke, I went out to walk around. The night was nice, and I could see patches of stars and clear sky. The air was still this evening, and the lamps all twinkled like stars inside intricate glass and bronze cages. I walked over the white concrete pathways and stopped. Somebody was tailing me. I whipped around, ready to attack my pursuers, but I was greeted by a flustered looking Germany.

"Oh, sorry...I just wanted to see if you were okay...really. I'll go now then." He was ready to turn back after his lame excuse.

"No," I was surprised by my own words. He stopped in his tracks and looked back. "Stay."

"Alright." He came over and draped a scarf over my exposed neck. "I was just worried. You went out so fast."

"I have a problem. With emotions. I can't just let them slide, or else the whole school will know my name and face."

"Oh," he looked at me, the moonlight reflecting off his eyes. "I don't think you're like that."

"I just don't like when it seems like I'm accused." I admitted. "And that's what America was doing."

"I thought that. I wanted to stop him...but I guess you can't stop the Land Across the Sea."

"Спасибо." The word came out without me knowing. Before I could apologise and translate, he smiled and replied.

"Конечно." He smiled. There was a thick German accent, but I could understand him.

"You speak Russian?"

"A little. Mostly understand. Living with your father and all." He said awkwardly, tucking his chin, since he'd given his scarf to me. I took it off, knowing that I could survive ten minutes of cold weather. "Thanks." He whispered, when I gave him back his scarf. "I'm sorry, again."

"I know you are, you are forgiven." I sighed.

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" He asked, pressing against my side. "I'm not America. I won't tell anyone."

"Promise?"

His eyes were full of seriousness. "I promise."

"I'm actually taking a therapy. With Dr. Austria. That's why I saw you this afternoon. I was coming out of his office. I asked him to help me with this...problem. He told me it's minor, but still."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Russia." He hugged my waist. "I didn't know."

"It's not your fault." I said roughly. I hugged him back, but the embrace was not long. "I'm cold. And tired. So I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Okay." He seemed to be upset, but I had my own problems to deal with. And my father was going to call me as well. "Bye then. Have a good night."

"You too." I walked away and he kept staring at me till I rounded a corner. As soon as I did so, my phone started to vibrate. Good time to call papa. "Ало?"

"Hi Russia, how are you?" My father's low voice sounded through the speaker.

"Okay..."

"Just okay? Not good?"

"No...I'm having some problems..."

"With Austria? He should know better." He sounded irritated.

"No. With my friends."

"Ah, I see. The frozen ice cube, crazy cat and Burger King?"

"Sort of, yeah. Well and..." I wanted to say Germany, but it stuck in my throat. I couldn't let him know now.

"And who?"

"Nobody," I lied quickly.

"Россия." He said sternly. "Your father loves you. We shouldn't keep

any secrets from each other."

"Yes, papa." My head bowed in defeat. "And Germany. My new friend. Well...he's been a friend for a long time now." Silence and static met my words. "Papa?" I heard a little cough in the background and a whispered swear.

"Yes?" His voice reappeared.

"I'm sorry, papa. It's not just the academics. I'm having the stupidest kinds of issues. Social and emotional ones that are frivolous and childish, I should really-,"

"Russia, it's not too long till the holiday break. You'll come back here for the recess and we'll figure everything out...I lied to you about some things. I have to apologise and tell you the truth."

"Can't you say it now?" I sounded like a five year old.

"No, Russia. Not over the phone." He chuckled. "You know me and my surveillance paranoia. And I want to see you when I tell you this. It's important."

"You...you don't mind me being friends with Germany, right?"

"No no. I don't. That's okay. You have the right to pick who you're friends with. It's not my responsibility. You're an adult now. And I have to tell you some adult things. Good?"

"Yes."

"You're a good child, Russia." His voice became softer over the phone. There was a steady clink of porcelain against metal. He was probably drinking his evening tea. "Don't work yourself up too much. Follow what Austria says and you'll be fine. And if you don't like your friends...well then you don't have to keep them. They don't deserve to have you."

"Спасибо," I managed to say.

"I'll see you soon, my little owlet. Good night."

"Good night." I hung up. On felt a little better after my call. At least my father was on my side, and it took pressure off me. He approved of my friendship with Germany. That's what mattered.

Спасибо - Thank you

Конечно - of course

Ало - hello (Greeting over the phone.)

Россия - Russia

Surprises and Laziness

[image]

I was kind of worried about Russia. I trotted back to the dining hall to collect my things and go to sleep.

"What happened?" Japan asked.

"Nothing. He said he's tired." I answered. I was ready to leave when Iceland stopped me.

"Is he mad at us?"

"A little. Kind of."

"Well, did you tell him we're sorry?"

"Yes, he's not mad at you."

"I'll tell him then." Iceland said decisively. "He's probably overworked. The professors give a lot during this time."

"Boy this guy is dangerous to play with," America put his sunglasses into his bag and put on a light jacket. "I don't ever know when he's happy or sad or faking it."

"As you may have noticed, nobody does," Iceland took out his phone and started to dial a number.

"Who are you calling?" America perked up in his seat, fully alert now.

"Russ."

"Don't."

"Why not?" He put the speaker next to his ear.

"He'll yell at you,"

"No he wo-," Iceland stopped in mid sentence and made a wide smile. I guessed that Russia picked up the receiver. "Hi Russ! Sorry for making you so angry. We really didn't mean it. Oh. Well...well yeah...okay....oh, we understand, definitely....don't worry...yeah, we'll be alright...yeah, no I'll be quiet when I come in...sure...Good night." He ended the call.

"He says he has a headache," he announced.

"Big deal." America yawned.

"Says someone who hasn't had a real one yet." Japan pushed his shoulder.

"Uh huh. He just wants to be anti social. He can do that on break." He nodded slowly.

"It is late," I cut in, looking at the clock on the wall. "So we should get going."

"Yeah, you're right." Japan nodded and started to pack up. "I have a feeling that tomorrow will be a day full of surprises."

"Japan, your soothsayer abilities are not good. Don't even try to predict the future." Iceland sighed.

"Tomorrow, one of us will receive ground-breaking news!" She said mysteriously. I couldn't really take her too seriously. She was a good friend, and a bad future seer, for all her supernatural abilities she claims to have.

"Good night, Japan!" We all said and left her to predict more omens in the night.

Bzzzzz. Bzzzzzzz. Bzzzz.

"What is that infernal noise?" I asked my groggy self. It was about five thirty in the morning and still dark. Meanwhile my cell phone was going crazy on my desk and even dropped to the floor. Finland was still fast asleep and would be for another thirty minutes. This

better not be a telemarketer, I thought to myself. No, it was my foster father.

"Hello?" I said still sleepy. The phone's backlight illuminated our dark room. I could see Finland's face, which contorted with the light irritation. I myself was squinting from the harsh lights. It was still very dark and I crept over to my bed to sit down.

"Germany, are you there?" His voice was very sharp and clear, so much that I had to bring the volume down.

"Yes, it's me."

"Good morning. I just wanted to say hello," what a great time to say hello. At five thirty in the morning. But he continued talking without stopping. "I know this might sound very spontaneous, but I called my son yesterday. You might know him, he said he's your friend. Russia."

"Yes, he's my friend." I pulled a blanket over myself and stepped out onto the cold balcony, since I heard Finland mutter in his sleep. I went over to sit in a chair and tucked my ice cold feet under me. "My best friend, actually."

"Very nice," I could hear the squawking of the rooster in the background. He must be heading off to work soon. "Well, since you two are friends and you know that the Winter Recess is coming shortly, Britain told me, wouldn't it be nice if you came here? To our home? I know you have never met my other children, but wouldn't it be a good time to do that? After all, you know Russia already. It wouldn't be very fatherly of me to leave you on UK's island or in your old apartment complex. What do you think?"

"That's great!" I exclaimed after a long period of silence and shuffling from his side.

"Wonderful. You can travel with Russia and I'll pick you two up from the train station." I heard a door slam and the starting of the motor on his car. "Well, I have to go now. Have a good day and week. I'll see you soon."

"Bye papa," I said.

"Bye Germany," he ended the call. Wow. I couldn't go back to sleep. Not after news like this. I guess Japan does have seer abilities. I stayed outside till Finland woke up and saw me outside, wrapped in a blanket. I came inside and Finland went for his morning 'run', which was actually a long distance walk. I went into our semi dark kitchenette and made some tea. Even though you couldn't drink from the tap, you could boil it and it would become harmless...relatively. I made a nice tea and figured I should rummage in the cabinets to find something to eat. Every choice was not very appealing or appetizing, but still. I didn't want to go outside, since I sat out there for a half an hour. Finland wouldn't mind. He liked to share anyway and he said so himself. When I ate the cold and mushy oatmeal with a feeling of must. What was day was today? Oh, yes. The last day of class before the hectic half week that you can't count as productive. I put on a clean light blue dress shirt, scooped up my books for the day and left quickly. I only realised when I came out of the gates that I might be too early. I shrugged the thought off as soon as it came. Why would I be? And teachers like early students. I had English today. It felt like I was always in this class. It wasn't bad. I liked English. When I came in, I heard Mr. UK talking with a student.

"Oh hello Germany," he greeted me when he creaky door gave away my presence.

"Hi," I waved. I breathed out in relief on the inside. It was Russia, and he smiled when I came in. I guessed that he got over what was bothering him. I sat down next to him and even though only I came in, the professor and Russia did not engage further into their conversation. Instead, Mr. UK went back to writing on his blackboard and tracing in his teacher's book, and Russia turned to me with the biggest smile on his face.

"Hi Germany! Aren't you excited about the break?"

"Yeeees,"

"I'm finally going to see my father again. I missed him so much."

"Uh huh."

"Where are you staying?" He asked. "Here? Or..."

"Actually...well your dad called me this morning...at five thirty."

"He did?"

"Yes, and he said that I'm going to go with you." Here we go, his mood is going to switch rapidly.

I was wrong, and he nodded, his face still bright with happiness. "Really! That's great!"

"Yes, it is."

"If you see Iceland, Japan or America in your other classes, tell them that I'm fine now. I'm not mad at them anymore." He took out a Russian book, a poetry and prose, and started to read. I honestly didn't see him ever reading, but when I looked over his shoulder, it seemed very interesting. I kept reading with him, knowing the few words on the page, deciphering the rest by reading between the lines. I did this until I felt my chin rest on his shoulder and he jolted a little, snapping me out of my trance.

"Sorry!" I whispered. He seemed to only be surprised, but wasn't angry or annoyed.

"That's fine, you could've told me you also wanted to read it." He said, pushing it in the middle of the two desks. "There's an English version in the library. It's a pretty interesting read...for a banned book."

"What?"

"My father won't let me read this one. I don't know why. But I asked for it here, and they gave me a copy. To keep, they said. It's going to be tough hiding it from my father, so I'll leave it here. Then I'll pick up where I left off after."

"Oh, I see."

"Father is very picky on what I should or should not be exposed to. I will never tell him that here I can read any book I want, say my opinion or even make friends with 'enemies'." He took the poetry book from the desk and lightly snapped it shut to put it in his bag. When the rest of the class filed in, Mr. UK announced that it was going to be the last formal class of the current year, and that we'll most likely do some independent work next class. The rest of the 'formal class' was an open discussion about our book. The Book, as Russia had named it. He only partially participated, and only when he was asked to. He would spit out a generic answer without much thought, but Mr.UK was to say the least, satisfied with his answers. When we finished, he wished us a good day.

"Goodbye," he erased the blackboard with an unpleasant sound.

"See you soon," Russia tapped my shoulder and disappeared into the crowd. I couldn't even say anything back, he was gone that quickly. I looked sideways at my schedule. I didn't need it anymore, but I knew what was coming at I looked at it to prove myself. Ah yes, History. This was not a good class. Professor Hungary was so irritated at Czechia's avoiding attitude, he sat him in a seat next to me. What a good idea! Even though Czechia didn't ever talk to me, make any comments or even notice me, he gave off a very dark and frustrated aura. He wasn't like that all the time, and out of class he was actually very happy and a leader of a big group. But that was the Czechia that I would never meet. When I came into the class, he was already there, talking enthusiastically with his girlfriend, Slovakia. She was laughing at something he was saying. Today, the classroom was very warm and the air felt thick and papery. Professor Hungary was sitting at his large desk and overlooked the class. He was busy flipping though his notes for the day and was drinking a fruit tea, judging by the light coloured drink in his mug. I sat down next to Czechia and the effect was immediate. He stopped talking, his face fell and he faced forward, hunched over and sullen.

"Good morning," I tried.

"Mmph." He growled back. Well, that's all I could hope for. At least he didn't yell or swear or faint, for that matter. Slovakia looked at me, and when I looked back she put on a smile and waved a little

too brightly. She circled her arms around Czechia's neck, said something, and then got up and left to her seat. Meanwhile, the class became full and the professor stood up to get our attention.

"Good morning everyone," he started and straightened his tie. "As you all know, soon we will have the Winter Recess. As exciting and useless it is. But I don't make the rules. So be it. On different note, today's class will be about..." the class was about some sort of war. Again, that's all he would rattle on about. I took my notes, but wasn't invested in the class. One time, one of his students came into class. The whole class whispered about who would willingly do their PhD with him as advisor. We took our exciting and useless notes, and packed up to leave afterward. His class was boring, but it was easy as long as you wrote down his main points. He was very good at droning on, and his voice never broke or changed pitch. Rumour said that he listened to rock music when students weren't around. Somehow, I believe that one, since nobody can be so plain and two dimensional. One of the most humane professors was Luxembourg. Our short and funny teacher for the most complicated subject to date was sitting at his desk, printing out sandals on his 3-D printer when we came into his class after our last class.

"Do you need those?" Japan skipped into class after me.

"Yes, I do." Luxembourg kept his eyes on the layers of plastic that were morphing into a pair of shoes. "One of my friends invited me to his place. It's literally in the middle of a desert. So I decided to prepare myself. The weird and nerdy Luxembourg way."

"Who's your friend?" Japan, with her invasion of privacy.

"Egypt. He's been pestering me to come over and celebrate the New Year's with him and some of my other friends. So, I felt this year we should do it."

"Ooo, that's nice! I'm going to spend new year's with my family. They're a happy bunch and also a bit insane. But all's well. My cousin had a firecracker explode in his face last time."

"Oh, that's...bad."

"Not really. He's okay now." She looked at the now completed sandals in the printer and then back at me. "Hi Germany, how are you?"

"Fine. Good. Great."

"Fantastic! I am too. Our classes literally did nothing. Even our professors are ready for the break. Oh, hi Russ, how's your headache?" I didn't even notice him standing next to me until Japan gave away his presence.

"Hello," he yawned. "I'm fine now. A little tired as well. But I have to meet Professor France soon. That should be fun."

"What are you going to do?"

"Talk. About my role in her production. It's a good role for a bad singer and actor."

"Nonsense. I think you'd do great! Right, Germany?" She nudged me in the side.

"Yeah," I nodded automatically. He laughed warmly at my awkward comment.

Luxembourg finally logged off his computer and stood up in all his height. "So, sandals aside, hey everyone! I'm sure you all had very calm classes today, but as a class that has calculus in it, this is not the one! So grab your project that we've been working on last time and let's get started!"

"Ah, work," Japan sighed, going over to her partner. "I don't like it."

"As always," Russia smiled in her direction. "Aren't we all lazy? I am, definitely."

"Sometimes," I responded.

"Soon, you'll see me in full colours," he took my hand quickly and squeezed it gently resuming to his work just as quickly. "I can get very very lazy."

"I don't doubt it," was my last comment before I started to work beside him.

Home

[image]

Finally, the last bell of the class rung. Everyone was in a tense silence minutes before, waiting, straining to be let free. I was one of them. My last boring class of biology with our professor who liked to talk was a long stretch and I was yawning every five minutes. Dissecting rabbit liver was hardly exciting, but my lab partner loved it. She kept making useless notes and oohing whenever we dug deeper in the disgusting pile of meat. I on the other hand, hated the blood clotting on the blue gloves and the horrible smell of bile that issued from every single group's 'project'. When professor Spain announced that we could leave, I stripped off the now purple gloves, washed my hands in the icy water and left without waiting or saying goodbye. As the bells rung outside with their monotonous clang, students poured out of their classes and out through the gates or to their dormitories. I already wished America a happy New year, since he didn't have to travel and he said he'd try. Trying is progress. When I came into our college, it was still quiet, with a large amount of people coming in and out.

"Hey Russ," I was greeted by Iceland, all ready to go. He looked like he was going backpacking across the world.

"Hello,"

"Can't believe that half of the year is just...gone."

"I can," I chuckled. "The next half will be worse, don't worry. And infinitely slower."

"Maybe."

"So...have a good holiday, I guess?"

"You guess?" He said in a mock scandalized tone.

"I hope," I corrected myself. "I hope you have a good holiday."

"Thank you. Have a great break." We shook hands and went our separate ways. Him to the station outside of the campus and I to collect my things and meet Germany. It was easy to figure out what to bring and what not to. The only things I needed were headphones, a pillow, my phone, some food and two books. I took some kind of foodstuff for my younger brother, who might want a souvenir from Mr. UK's island. I left Lermontov's book in the dorm. I didn't want father to see how curious, rebellious and independent I had become. He told me not to read it after all, because I was too young, too inexperienced. Now I know why.

"Goodbye room...for now." I said aloud, and closed the door. As soon as I did, I heard my phone vibrate. Ah, Germany. "Hello?"

"Hi Russia, um, where are you?" The background noise was deafening and his voice sounded muffled and scared. He was probably already at the station.

"I'm coming. I'm still on campus."

"Do you have tickets?"

"Yes," I had purchased two third class tickets the day before. I couldn't believe the cost when I calculated the amount in rubles.

"Okay. I'm on platform fourteen. The train stops here." His voice was suddenly tense and worried. "Please hurry. I don't want to be late. There are so many people here."

"Relax. The more you worry, the worse it becomes. I'll be there soon." I soothed. "Bye."

"Bye." I hung up on him first and went down into the almost empty campus. On the way I saw Luxembourg talking with a strange looking foreign man with white robes. Luxembourg recognised me and waved, and not wanting to engage in conversation, I waved back and dashed out through the gates. To my surprise, little snowflakes started to fall and soon the wind created a beautiful and

disastrous storm. I hoped that the trains wouldn't be stopped. When I came to the fourteenth platform, I found Germany sitting on a bench, covered with snow. He had a tote bag with him that he tried to unsuccessfully shield from the gale.

"Hello!" He exclaimed when he saw me. He dusted off a spot next to him for me to sit down.

"Hi," I hugged him. I considered it normal to hug him now, and I liked it even. "How do you like the weather?"

"Magical." He breathed, catching a snowflake with his hands. "Too bad I didn't bring gloves."

"You can have mine." I offered. He accepted them without thinking. "Do you think the trains will be affected."

"Some might. Not ours though. It's a tough one."

"If you say so." He was correct, and I soon saw the head of the train poke through the snowy landscape. It had a large plow attached to it and was propelling through the snow with speed.

"See?" Germany stood up, shaking the snow off himself and heading towards the doors. "Wasn't I right?"

"Indeed you were." I stepped into the warm compartment, searching for our seats. I took the window seat and when I only just got comfortable, Germany had the brilliant idea of sitting on top of me.

"I like the window," he said simply.

"I do too." I protested.

"We can sit like this of you want." He looked back at me.

"No thank you. I'll sit next to you." He let me get off and sat down contentedly next to the window. I couldn't chase the thought that fore me in my head when I looked at his face, his content smile. *He looks exactly like his father. How uncanny.* I tried to get myself out of the habit of thinking those kinds of thoughts. It was unfair, after all. And I promised him not to as well. I remembered what Dr. Austria

told me about borders. He drew me four squares and asked me how many there were. I said four. He told me it was only one, but it was just divided. That was one of our last meetings. He really helped me, but I only talked to him and scheduled regular appointments because my father said so. I didn't want to admit that I was still a little dependent on my father's judgement. Even more than my brothers and sister. I looked around the compartment. It didn't exactly look like a third class car. The theme was red and silver, with greying carpeting and white translucent hangings on the windows. Albeit, they were now yellowing and the red cold faux leather seats were a bit worn out, it still gave off an impression that this was once a very expensive car. Germany kept staring at the flashing scenery as it sped before our eyes. The scene was starting to change from the marshy and moorland hills to a flatter ground that was both drier and colder. I took out my softcover book that I haven't even looked at for four months, and started to read. I felt completely relaxed, with the hum of the train and the murmuring of the other people around us. Why do some people prefer the cabin of a plane in the air, where all you see are clouds, all the same and uniform when you can choose to travel by rail, where the scenery always changes and you feel connected to the ground and the soothing sounds of the tracks lulls you to sleep? That was, until the train came to a screeching halt, sending my head down to my knees. With a groan, I pushed myself up and asked Germany what happened.

"Something on the tracks." He responded, trying to look out of the flat window. "A deer or moose of some sort."

"Are you sure?"

"Or maybe they just wanted to stop." He shrugged back. "It does have a Russian driver. Who knows, maybe they wanted to smoke?"

I rubbed my eyes and stretched my neck. "They have got to be kidding."

"Oh, were moving again." He said, as the train jolted into motion once more.

"They better explain themselves." I grumbled, putting my ushanka

over my eyes. The yellow light from above was agitating.

"They probably won't. But we'll see." After a few minutes and still no announcement, I conceded to the fact that they wouldn't explain. I was almost asleep again when the annoying sound of the loudspeaker came on.

"Attention ladies and gentlemen, we are sorry for the unexpected stop. We had an unprecedented issue. Thank you." Droned the conductor.

"Oh really?!" I hissed when they finished. "I was almost asleep!"

"You can now," Germany said, trying hard not to laugh.

"Now I can't!" I whined and he rubbed my back sympathetically.

"We'll be there soon." He leaned on the windowsill. "It is a speed train, after all." The landscape outside was now a snowy flat expanse of plotted land, with the trees being borders. Even though we were moving relatively fast, everything else was slowing down and stopping in the deep snow. With time, the farmlands became dense birch forests, silent and white, then thick large pines, then dirty little villages with tiny gardens and little roads, then came the high rises, carved out of the earth, then the city I always knew came in and swallowed up everything. The heartbeat of the urban life pumped faster with the snow, and everyone drove, walked, moved, talked, and went around faster, with a sense of purpose and haste. When the train pulled onto the platform, I instantly saw my father, who was standing under the roof, smoking and waiting for us already.

"There he is," Germany pointed at him as the vehicle finally stopped. I pushed through the crowd with Germany in tow and we made our way to father.

"Papa!" I yelled as we approached. He turned to us first in surprise then joy.

"Russia!" He hugged me and then Germany. "I'm so glad to see you both."

"We are too." I smiled. He seemed to be shorter than I remembered in September, but I guessed that I probably grew.

"Let's get going." He took my bag and my hand and steered us away from the crowd. "How was school?"

"Good." I replied and squeezed my hand around his tighter.

"Mm, just good?" He mused. "No details?"

"It's school," Germany sighed. "Nothing can be better... or worse." He was in back of us, but father took his hand as well so that he didn't get lost behind us.

"Not the impression I got when term was about to start." Father said. "You were so excited, I remember." Germany nodded in agreement.

"Well, school has the good and the bad. Mostly good with classes. Bad with people."

"Rumours? Gossip?" He laughed. "That was popular even in my technical school. Imagine shoving a bunch of war children in the same room. Britain likes to play with fire, I see." It was like he had the ability to see across the invisible land borders. We went out of the station and found his car, parked in an illegal parking space. "Ah, no ticket yet. Good." We climbed into the all familiar «Lada» and soon we were on the road. Germany looked pretty uncomfortable as if he was an unwanted guest at a party. He kept biting his lip and looking around, not making eye contact with me. I felt kind of sorry for him and I took his hand. It was a little sweaty and cold, but he looked at me with appreciation and he didn't break my grip. Desperate to make conversation in the silent car, the only noise being the hum of the engine and my father's chewing on gum, I started.

"Papa, how are Belarus and Ukraine?"

"They're fine. Kazakhstan misses you most. He really wanted to come with me but then he felt that his nap was something he wanted more. He was very excited the whole day." He looked at me

through the head mirror (I think that's what it's called) and his green eyes met mine.

"I brought him something."

"That's nice. I'm sure he'll love anything you give him."

"Who's Kazakhstan again?" Germany whispered to me. "He's your brother, right?"

"He's Russia's brother. The youngest and most troublesome." My father interjected. He veered across four lanes of traffic to get to an exit. He seemed not to notice, and proceeded on a path to a little village. I knew Germany was going to ask if we lived here, but we didn't stop, and went on and on, till the paved road turned to two rocky dirt paths for the car tires. We drove through the forest then through the grassland. My father started to hum a tune, which was barely audible over the car tires running along the rocks on the path. I recognised the crooked apple tree and knew that we weren't so far from home. My heart sung with happiness and I felt myself breathe calmly for the first time since I left. No image, no pretending. I was myself here. "We are here." Father announced, turning off the motor.

"Yay!" I definitely sounded like I was five. Germany smiled and raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. The house looked the same, and the only thing that changed was that everything looked cleaner and some things were newer. The front of the house looked like it was repaired, and the steps weren't rotted out or broken anymore. The huge double doors opened and Kazakhstan flew out on his little golden wings. He was probably waiting for us, looking out of the window.

"РОССИЯ!" He hurled himself into my arms. "I missed you a lot! Why did you disappear for so long?"

"I went to school." I petted him on his head affectionately. "But I'm here for now." Kazakhstan was sweet but a little forgetful when he deemed information useless.

"Who's that?" Kazakhstan slid out of my hug and ran to Germany.

He approached Germany, who waved at him and then Kazakhstan hugged him as well.

"That's my friend." I explained.

"You smell like Russia," Kazakhstan said and Germany laughed. I shook my head and sighed. Kazakhstan said whatever he thought. "What's your name?"

"Germany,"

"Ger..man..ee." Kazakhstan said slowly and then whirled around and went back into the house. "Ukraina, Belarus, Russia and Ger-man-ee are here!" In a second, Ukraine came waddling out and hugged me lightly and looked over Germany, nodding in acknowledgement, as if he already knew him. Belarus kissed me on the cheek and waved at him. The snow was up to her knees and she struggled to stay in one place from the cold.

"We're so glad you're back," she smiled, holding up some crackers and crushing them below her. As soon as she did, Caramel and the chickens ran across the yard and started to peck at the ground, well snow, below her feet. She carefully picked up the world's biggest and most obnoxious and housebroken rooster and pet him. Caramel looked at me with his orange eyes and dared me to come close to him or his owner. Only Belarus loved him and he loved only Belarus back.

"My family," I announced to Germany. He nodded and smiled.

"Hi, again." He said awkwardly. "I've never been here before...so...I don't know much about country living."

"It's easier than in the city." Belarus said. "It's calmer, more natural and you can see the stars at night."

"True. But its also dirty and a lot of work." Ukraine argued. He was given a glare from his sister and then sighed. "But its worth the trouble. Somewhat."

"Hopefully you'll like it here," father's deep voice cut in. He was leaning against the car and was overlooking our conversation. "It

can get loud, unexpected and crazy sometimes." He went into the house.

"I signed myself up." Germany laughed. "Well, fate did."

"I hope you are ready then." I told him.

"I am." He looked in my direction, with a look of knowing that I've never seen in his eyes before.

Россия - Russia

It feels like I haven't updated the story in a long time. I've been busy these past days. Sorry for that! And my chapters haven't gotten any shorter...

Night-time

[image]

I was honestly a bit afraid to meet Russia's siblings. It felt very awkward seeing Russia behave like a little child and being the spectator and onlooker, I couldn't do much. USSR probably felt this too, but he made no comment on it. When we got to their home, the huge and old mansion in the middle of a snowy field was a spectacular sight. Russia's youngest brother came to greet us and even hugged me, asking my name. He was very sweet. The place had a feel of being lived in for many many years. USSR led us inside, into the dark, north-facing living room with a fireplace. I left my soaked shoes on the mat near the front and Russia took me and my things upstairs, along the spiralling staircase, to the first room. His home was constructed in a very fancy way, with one side of the hall having the rooms and the other in a mezzanine level, a grandiose view into the living room. The guest room that I was given felt a little cold and empty, with no personality or character or signs of somebody ever sleeping in it.

"This is the room," Russia closed the door to the windy balcony.

"Your home is nice," I commented. I thought I might've said that a million times already.

"My father made it. By himself." Russia said with pride. "The whole house. That's why it looks like this. I think it would be really expensive if somebody built it for us."

"Probably, and the location is nice too."

"It's safe, far away and isolated. Just like my father always wanted." Russia looked out of the balcony door and smiled. "I grew up here, if you didn't know."

"That's...nice." I had no more words to describe everything. "What do you do during this time of year?"

"Have food. Basically that's it. And my grandfather comes for no reason. It always ends up that he's thrown out of the house. But he comes the next year, and then the next. I guess he thinks he has fatherly rights. And he acts like he's still the Tsar of everything. But we kind of let him, since he's family. So I had to warn you about that." Russia explained. "He also will point out everything at the worst time. So brace yourself for his commentary."

"When is he coming?"

"In three days."

"Three?"

"Yes," I thought he might come up with a snappy remark when I re-asked the question, but he went with the flow. "He takes father's room for no reason and forces him to sleep on the couch downstairs. But we got used to him ordering father around. The most important rule is to not point it out."

"Okay." He was starting to ramble a bit, but I went on with it. He was probably worried that I would say something dumb in front of his family. I could understand his dilemma. "I definitely understand." I said aloud. He gave an appreciative nod and let me unpack by myself. I wished he'd stayed. The room was very plain and was definitely for guests. I put my clothing into the drawers next to the bed and set one of my new favourite books on the nightstand. When I came out, Kazakhstan waved at me, holding something in his hand happily and disappeared into his room next to mine.

"I gave him a British foodstuff." I heard Russia's voice behind me.

He looked happy with his decision to bring a gift. "He's really happy."

"He's very sweet,"

"He is. And to everyone." Russia smiled. He walked on to one of the last doors and went into a room. I followed him without thinking. It took me a bit of time to realise that it was his. It was simple in design, with a strange looking bookshelf made out of planks of wood, and he had a wood floor, not entirely covered by a navy carpet. His bed had a fluffy blue grey throw over it and a doll leaning on the white pillows. A large French balcony was partially obscured by the deep sapphire heavy drapes. Russia himself was on his knees pawing through his dresser drawers, muttering to nobody. He noticed me when he looked up and I felt like an intruder being caught.

"Uh, hi um, I just wanted to...you know...see where you went, um, I really wasn't thinking..." I stammered.

He just shrugged and didn't give any reaction. "Of course, look around if you want. There's nothing much to see." He continued to search though the drawer till he dug out a sheet of crumpled paper and yelled. "Victory!"

"What?"

"Found it. The router password." He said, brandishing the paper in front of me. "Ukraine wanted it and couldn't find it. As usual." He skipped down the stairs and talked to his brother in Russian. I, again, with nothing to do, followed him down the creaky steps into the living room, where Ukraine and Russia were arguing about something. The fireplace was lit and made shadows dance eerily across the dark room. The fact that it had no windows and was facing north made it even darker. I crossed over the thick red carpet and sunk into one of the two armchairs next to the fire. Opposite of me, the two brothers squashed themselves into one chair. Even though it was large, they were making it difficult for themselves by intentionally making less space.

"Украина, перестал толкаться живо!" Russia complained.

"Ага, а как насчет нет?" Ukraine remarked with a smile on his face. After a curse and a growl from his brother, he huffed and slunk off to the lighter room on the south side. Russia raised his chin in triumph and gladly accepted Kazakhstan's company when he came down and snuggled with his older brother. I wished I had a brother as well. Kazakhstan must've sensed my sadness and came over to sit next to me, making little chirping noises like a bird.

"Hi!" He said after he finished his little chirpy song.

"Hello,"

"Why are you so sad?" He asked, rounding his eyes.

"I'm not sad."

"Yes you are. You look very sad."

"I feel weird being here," I explained, not sure if he'd understand. "Like I'm a guest, a watcher."

"Oh," he looked down and the slid over to Russia, taking his hand and pulling him to me. He pushed him down to sit right next to me and then planted himself on Russia's lap. "Now you're not guest." He smiled a wide and sincere grin. Russia was turning red and turned to watch the fire. We were literally sitting in one seat. Kazakhstan, thankfully did not notice the awkwardness.

"Thanks Kazakhstan," I said and he started to whistle another little lively song. He had an extraordinary ability to mimic bird noises and churrs. He fluttered his golden wings in Russia's face and giggled when he shooed the wings away. I felt myself nod off and soon enough Russia was shaking me awake.

"Dinner." He announced, and headed off to the adjacent room, which I guessed was the kitchen. It was a much lighter room, with white walls and large windows. The kitchen was as light as the living room was dark. I washed my hands quickly under the scalding heat of the tap, and sat down next to Russia and Kazakhstan. The food was of inferior quality than that of the cafeteria in the school, but it was made all by hand, I noticed. Once

we all sat down, everyone except USSR bent their heads and muttered a prayer. I, along with my foster father, waited for them to finish. USSR was calmly sitting and staring at the wall, and I wondered if they always did this, and how did he cope with being left out. Judging by his nonchalance, he probably cared less than I thought. His eyes met mine and he gave me an apologetic look, as if saying sorry for not warning me of this ritual. When they finished their prayer, USSR turned away and helped himself to food.

"I should've warned you that we pray before meals," Russia whispered to me. "And father doesn't do it with us."

"Why not?" I said back, quietly while helping myself to some potatoes and meat on the table.

"He's an atheist. He doesn't have the faith. Our grandfather taught us." Russia looked down at his plate. "If it were father's will, we'd all be like him."

"Oh,"

"Any way," he continued, this time at an audible level. "Belarus, can you give me some potatoes?" He was intent on switching the subject and he talked with his father about classes.

"Never thought," USSR said to Russia. "That France would bend to somebody else. She's one that has to have her way. Subtly."

"She was interested in me," Russia responded back. "She even wants to do Queen of Spades, just because of me."

"She could just be expanding her horizons." USSR countered. "Most teachers fear that they're too narrow in subject. Then it gets bad, since they want you to 'explore'. That's how conflicts start. By 'exploring' our problems and finding out, oh yes, there's my problem." He went on to talk about something else, and then he spiralled into something none of us understood. He just kept on talking. Ukraine sighed loudly and picked at his food. It was probably common in the household for their father to ramble on, since he had no spouse to talk to. Belarus was finished with her food and was looking around, occasionally nodding at USSR's

words, politely saying nothing and Russia chewed on a piece of meat for a very long time, and made sure that he was occupied eating to not engage in conversation. Kazakhstan was licking his plate next to me and he then looked up, cocking his head at me.

"Are you really Russia's friend?" He asked.

"Yes." I said.

He smiled and put his elbows on the table. "Do you like Russia?"

"Uh, what do you mean?" I asked him. He said nothing for a long time, shoved some carrots in his mouth, then crunched and swallowed and finally spoke.

"Like loving." He giggled. After my initial silence which he probably took as a yes, he didn't wait for a definite answer and pestered Ukraine on a different note, leaving me speechless. Russia swallowed his final piece of meat after cutting the bits and chewing them for an eternity and offered to clear the table.

"Do you like the school, Germany?" USSR asked me out of the blue.

"Oh, yes. It's very nice." I briefly thought that he asked me that question already.

"No no. I mean what's going on. You said the people are bad there. How come?"

"Well...rumour travels fast. I had a class where one student fainted because I was working with him." I admitted. He cracked a smile and let out a forced laugh.

"Just because of your family? How unprogressive for such a *liberal* school." He chided, pouring himself a small glass of water. "I thought they would teach acceptance and everything."

"They do. Not everyone follows." Russia cut in. USSR looked at his son and the latter ceased to talk, turning back to his washing.

"Awful. Either you blindly follow or you follow only outwardly. No oppositions or in between. I just hate those kinds of people. They

say 'yes master' but they don't conform. Hypocrisy." He drained the glass in one gulp and then sighed. "Anyway, I need to go into the forest tomorrow, so I'm going to sleep. Казахстан, пойдем спать."

"So soon?" Kazakhstan hopped off his chair and hid under the table.

"Come on. You'll be very whiny tomorrow if you don't sleep now."

"No," he said stubbornly and hugged the leg table.

USSR shrugged. "Okay, fine. If you get scared at night you have to stay in your own room with бабай."

"NO!" Kazakhstan squealed in fear and jumped into USSR's shoulders. "Бабай is so scary!"

"Okay, then are you going to go sleep?" He took Kazakhstan's little arms and wound them around his shoulders.

"Yes, yes." He said, burying his face into his father's neck. Once they left, Ukraine snorted with laughter and Belarus shook her head in humour.

"Kazakhstan really believes in this one." Ukraine said. "This is one of dad's best made up monster that actually gets him to do stuff."

"Shh, it's the only thing that gets him to bed." Russia finished washing the last plate and put them to dry.

"True." Belarus yawned. "But I kind of want to go too." She stood up from her seat

"I'll stay." Ukraine walked over to the living room and curled up with a set of headphones on the hearthrug. "I'm not scared of бабай."

"Is this usual?" I asked Russia, who now sat on the countertop, his feet almost brushing the ground.

"Yeah. Mostly. Sometimes father stays up late with me or Ukraine, but Kazakhstan and Belarus have a streak of going to bed early. We usually read or do something by ourselves. Ukraine got into audio

books recently." He nodded to his brother, who was sitting on the rug next to the fire, wrapped in a blanket with headphones on his head. Russia went over to the fire as well and sat down on a new looking red couch a little away from the hearth. He turned on a bright lamp on a stand and started to read. I went over to him after a few seconds of hesitation and he welcomed me. He was reading a hardbound book in a different language that wasn't Russian or English. It was in German! After not having exposure to my native tongue for so long, I was immediately entranced by the words. It didn't matter even the subject. He periodically marked up the text with notes in the margins and it took him a lot longer to read the pages.

"What's the book called?" I asked. He turned to me and laughed.

"You should know!" He snapped the book shut and showed me the cover. Ah, a classical German novel. "Herr German Empire gave me this."

"Oh, I see." I nodded. He yawned in reply but said nothing. We stayed like that for sometime till I felt my eyelids drooping down. The warmth of the fire and the calmness radiating from Russia was overpowering. Soon enough his hand prodded my shoulder gently and he told me that he would be off to sleep.

"Come on," he whispered. "I can't carry you up the stairs!"

"Yes you can," I snuggled into the pillows on the couch. "I'm tired."

"So am I." He countered, taking the pillows away and blowing out the fire, so that it was dark. Ukraine had already left a long time ago. "Or you can sleep here. Though I wouldn't recommend it. Father and Belarus are noisy in the morning." He was starting to leave when I called him back.

"Why do you call your dad 'father'?"

"Isn't that what you'd do?" He said, turning on his phone's flashlight. "I call him papa in his face. That's all that matters."

"When you say "Father' it makes you sound like you don't know the

language." I hit the right spot and his grip on his phone faltered.

"Really?" He hissed in the dark.

"Yeah," I responded, getting up and making my way blindly towards the direction of the stairway. "Where is your bathroom?"

"Far end of the hall. Don't fall from the mezzanine." He warned.

"I'll be fine."

"I'm sure you will. I don't doubt it."

Украина, перестал толкаться живо - Ukraine, stop pushing me this instant

Ага, а как насчет нет - Uhuh, how about no

Казахстан, пойдем спать - Kazakhstan, let's go to bed

Бабай - A monster that was made up/took by my grandfather. I don't know if it is an actual thing or not. Some sort of creature to scare little children, basically.

Preparation and the Tsar

[image]

All was going well. It felt like I was just settled into bed when my alarm went off. I heard the creaky floorboards outside my room signalling that my father...no, dad, was awake. His footsteps were receding and the soft pitter patter of Belarus' feet now dominated the floor. With a light groan my door opened and she crept in.

"Russia," she whispered into my face. "Wake up."

"Hmph," I rolled over the to other side.

"Come on. Papa is waiting for you,"

"We don't need to go collect firewood so early," I whisper-groaned back.

"Now we do," she said, opening my curtains. "Grandpa is coming today."

"WHAT!" I bolted upright and looked at her with surprise. "No, he was supposed to come after tomorrow!"

"Change of plans," she sighed, airing out the room. "The house looks like a mess and we still have stuff to do."

"That's his fault," I grumbled, stumbling out of my room to the far end of the hall. I washed my face with the icy water in a metal basin that was standing in the shower. When I finished with my regular morning routine, I went to change clothing and met my father downstairs. He greeted me and passed some oatmeal, we ate quickly and silently and we went outside with Belarus skipping

down the steps soon after. The sky was still grey but all the snow had already fallen on the ground. The soft crunch of wet snow under our feet was the only sound heard as we entered the forest where we collected wood. After finding the right thickness of tree, our dad gave us both an axe each and told us what trees had to be cut. Soon the song of the axe reigned the quiet landscape.

"I think this is enough," father wiped his brow. "To sustain us for the next few days, at least."

"When is grandpa coming?" Belarus asked.

"When he wants to," he huffed in reply, tying up the wood blocks into uneven piles. He gave the lightest one to her and the middle on two me. The whole process took under twenty minutes. We left the woods and I could feel again that snow was falling. "Snow again,"

"Yay!" Belarus tried to catch the snowflakes in her mouth. "I love snow."

"Of course you do," I patted her head with my free hand.

"Hopefully grandpa won't get stuck in the snow," she seemed worried by that fact. Father and I exchanged a look of 'I sincerely hope he does'.

"Of course not," father said to her affectionately, though he had a strained edge to his voice as if he couldn't hold the lie in too long. Thankfully our grandfather wasn't here yet. We came in and found that everyone had woken up and had eaten the oatmeal on the table. "Good. I don't have to waste time," father said and immediately began to tidy up.

"Why now?" Germany asked me when I came over.

"Change of plan," I told him. "He's coming today."

"WHAT?" Germany had the same reaction as I did when I found out. "Wait, why today?"

"He does what he wants..." Ukraine muttered under his breath while cleaning the countertop. I took a cleaning cloth and motioned for

Germany to follow me upstairs. I gave him a cloth to clean the rails and doorways. I took a bucket with soapy water as well.

"Picky?" He asked when I gave him the instructions to what to do.

"He says he has 'dust allergies'. I think he's faking it, but he might." I said while dusting the railing. It definitely had a fine layer of little debris on it, but nothing very serious.

"Russia!" I heard my father yell to me from the back. "Open the door in my room and air it out!"

"Okay!" I took Germany by the wrist and pulled him to father's room.

"You could've asked me to come," he hissed, clutching his red wrist.

"You would've took too long," I opened the door and stepped in. I crept quietly into father's room, which smelled strongly of yew berry and pine. The soft brown carpet muffled my steps as I made my way across the room. Father's room didn't have anything on the walls, but he had a bookshelf all dedicated to photo albums. On the nightstand next to the bed was a book without a title on the front and a bottle of medication. I opened the door of the balcony, and the wind blew in, spraying snow in my face. The room instantly lost its aroma, to be replaced with the cold wind scent. Germany was busy cleaning the little nooks around the bookcases and he almost finished it all. "Are you one of those people who loves to clean?"

He looked up at me in question. "Who *likes* to clean?"

"You,"

"Uh, no. I like cleanliness, but not the actual process. My dad was the one who liked it...until he accidentally poured cleaner fluid in his eye." He rubbed the dust off of the desk he was brushing with a force.

"We don't even have that," I said, spraying a fine layer of water over the desk and clearing off till it shone. This should please grandfather. "We have water, soap and bleach. That's about it."

"That is all a household needs." Germany sighed heavily from his work. "Cleaner fluid is bad for skin anyway." He stopped cleaning when we both heard a loud cursing from downstairs and a ring of the landline phone. "Your grandfather," Germany grimaced before he heard a roar from below. He automatically put his hands on his ears and bent down.

"WHY ARE YOU STILL CALLING?" Father's voice echoed across the house. "CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND THAT WE'RE BUSY?" A little pause told us that grandfather was speaking, usually in his oily and sometimes irritating voice. But I heard father no more and in a couple of minutes he banged the phone on the charger. The call was finished. Next to me, Germany was very tense and didn't breathe. I touched his shoulder and he looked at me and in his eyes I could see that he was genuinely scared.

"What. Was. That?" He whispered harshly.

"Grandfather." I pried the cloth from his hands and dropped it into the dark water. "As you can see, we aren't normal."

"I wasn't counting on you all being normal." He shuddered and stood up. "But I was just shocked. I feel like I'm being yelled at when somebody raises their voice." He closed the door behind us when we left the cold room. Kazakhstan was in the hall, rubbing the floor with a wet mop. We had to creep around the dry edge next to the drop to get down. Father was doing two things at once and Belarus was skirting under everything to clean and cook simultaneously. Ukraine was vacuuming the living room and shaking out all of the pillows. The double doors were ajar and I could see tiny flecks of dust coming out into the outside.

"You finished?" Father asked, stirring a pot of soup, adding ingredients haphazardly without any notice.

"Yes," we said together.

"Please clean the white room," he handed me a new and clean bucket of hot water and shooed us away. Germany almost bumped into Belarus who was running around with peels on her head. I grabbed two sticks and hurried out.

"Let's go," I made sure he followed me to the room with the glass ceiling, notorious for being the most calm and strange room in the whole home. The noise became dimmer and dimmer as we went deeper down the hallway. The low couch in the back was pure white with its numerous fluffy throws and accent pillows. The two wooden chairs were put up against the far back wall in the empty wood floored lodge. The glass ceiling was covered in whiteness and the glass walls showed the deep snowy fields outside. The pine forest in the distance looked weighed down by the snow on the branches. No life stirred, and the only thing that moved were the snowflakes, dancing around with the help of the wind. I took out the two streaming rags and dropped them on the floor. "So you see this 'T' shape here?"

"Yes,"

"You put it on the floor, on the rag, and drag it across," I showed him how.

"Oh, okay," he copied my position and we made our way along the floor. After a working silence he stood up and shook his head. "Do you always do this?"

"Not as hectic as like right now." I explained. "I think grandfather just wants to pull father's last strings."

"That's kind of mean,"

"Was Russian Empire ever nice?" I replied finishing the final corner. "He likes to be in control. His shtick. And if it means we all fall over ourselves, the more the better."

"My grandfather doesn't do that," he said.

I shrugged as if I didn't care. "Well, they're all different. 'Tsar RE' loves his titles."

"Should I call him that?"

"In his face, yes. Don't call him 'mister'. We'll all have to hear about it." I rolled my eyes. "But under all those titles, he actually cares about us." I picked up the bucket of now tepid water and moved it

over to the glass walls. "Are you ready to paint the glass?"

"With what?"

"Water," I leaned the stick with the rag on the wall and slowly dragged it up and down, like a painter painting a partition. Soon enough, Germany followed suit until all the glass was soaked then dried. "Well, we're done!"

"Finally," he dropped his stick on the floor. We went out of the now spotless room and saw that the only place that was now messy was the kitchen. Ukraine had closed the doors already and was putting fresh logs into the unlit fire. The light in the dining room was on, even though it was relatively light in it and Kazakhstan was setting the table in his well...unique way, by putting napkins into the glasses with the utensils which were wrapped inside the napkins. The cups with the napkins and utensils inside were placed on the plate, right in the middle. I knew that grandfather would hate it until he found out that Kazakhstan did it. Then he would coo and say how thoughtful of him. Kazakhstan was definitely was the favourite grandchild. Meanwhile, the kitchen looked like an atom bomb exploded in it. Peels were everywhere and so we're different batches of sauces, mixing bowls, cut up vegetables and a large piece of thawing meat. Father was rummaging in a cupboard and had already taken off several shirts. He was only wearing a dark grey t shirt and was sweating profusely from the vapours of the multiple post on the stove. His commands to Belarus were accompanied by at least three swears at the end. I stepped carefully out of the kitchen when Belarus gave us a death glare.

"Okeey, everything is under control here," our rooms on the first floor didn't have doors so it would just be flowing from one chamber to the other. Ukraine was shaking out the doormat and placed all of our shoes under the dresser desk next to the entrance.

"There," he said before sneezing from the dust.

"Будь здоров," I told him.

"If I didn't need to hurry," he responded, placing the mat down. "Dad and Belarus didn't want any help. They said 'they're fine'."

"Its too small for everyone to be there," I pointed out.

"Well, that's because bowls are all over the place. Belarus started to put peels into her pockets because the trash bin is overflowing." He snickered but then resumed to frowning. "I'd help them...if they let me. Kazakhstan finished his decorations."

"Ta da!" Kazakhstan zoomed up to us and showed us his masterpiece. He put a spoon on a sting and hung it in the middle of the old chandelier in the dining room. It looked very tacky, but it was what he wanted.

"Very nice," Ukraine choked out, trying to resist the impulse of ripping it off. The next couple of hours would go on like this...

After the disastrous mess in the kitchen was cleared and all the food was set and ready, we all waited for grandfather to get here. Father was very angry, since he burned his whole upper arm and had to bandage it with aloe, since he was tripping over himself to get things done. Alone. With nobody's help. We sat idly on the seats and couch, waiting for grandfather to show up. I gave some of my smaller clothes to Germany so that he had something new to wear. The ticking of the huge clock that we had in the dining room was ticking slowly and it was the only sound, along with father's heavy breathing. Kazakhstan was busily preening his wings with his small fingers and Ukraine and Belarus were playing a game with their hands requiring no communication between them. Father looked at the clock darkly and clenched his jaw, rubbing the spot where he was burned. Germany tapped his feet on the carpet and whistled.

"Stop it," father growled. Germany immediately ceased to whistle. "If you whistle in the house, you'll have no money."

"Sorry," he whispered. After a few more minutes of silence, there was a heavy knock on the door. Father bolted upright and went over to open the door. It was him. Our grandfather.

Будь здоров - bless you (be healthy)

Grandfather and the Clock

[image]

If tension was gold, I'd be rich. The heavy knocking on the door cut though the thick atmosphere that we were all in. USSR went to open it, but his hand hovered on the door handle, shaking and doubting. After another rather angry knock, he sighed and opened it. And there he was. Russia's grandfather. The first thing that leaped out at me was his face. Russian Empire was a bit shorter than his son, but his his posture, facial expression and crown all gave away his total authority over the family. One of his eyes was obscured by a black eyepatch with an eagle on it, the other was a weird dark purple. I figured out where Russia got his strange eye colour now. His clothing looked very expensive and fitted a monarch. The pure gold epalettes on his shoulders were only one piece of rare metal or gemstone on his clothing. The collar of his uniform was open and I could see his exposed neck. I wish I hadn't. Right in the middle, where the neck meets chest was a large amethyst set into his white skin. The thought even made me sick. He carried with him a cane and a relatively simple suitcase stood next to him on the snowy doorstep. His clothing was intricate but not suitable for such extreme weather. Nobody spoke until he did.

"Что стоишь? На, положи наверх." He looked at his son with disdain. "Хватит на меня смотреть, уходи." He hissed and USSR left to go upstairs with Russian Empire's case, cursing under his breath. The older man clicked his tongue in a disapproving manner and turned to us. I felt myself go rigid when his eyes swept over me.

"Who are you?" He asked in a very bad Russian accent. I thought

USSR had a bad one. Russia jumped to my defensive as soon as his grandfather spoke.

"That's Germany," he blurted out. "He's adopted."

Russian Empire looked very sceptical, but didn't press further. "Ah, I see. Very nice. USSR figured that he can't have more children, so he should adopt the whole world." He looked me up and down like a rotten pear and the sighed dramatically. "Ah well, you can't change your father's strange ways, now can you?" Next to me, Russia clenched his fist tightly and all of the muscles on his jaw were visible. He was trying hard not to speak. Fortunately, he switched the subject when he saw his favourite little grandchild. "Kazakhstan! My little baby!" Kazakhstan smiled and jumped into his grandfather's arms.

"Hi grandpa!" He said back, wrapping his wings around the other.

"Did your wings get bigger?"

"Yeah! I'm big now, just like papa!"

"Yes, yes." Russian Empire smiled a very transparent smile. He seemed like a theatrical man, with many masks to wear for every occasion. He put Kazakhstan down and chatted with Ukraine and Belarus for a little while before turning to Russia and me. During that time, I looked up to see USSR looking down from the mezzanine, strategically out of view. His green eyes were full of boiling anger, humiliation and hurt. When our gazes locked, he shook his head quickly and backed up against the wall silently. I took it for a sign to keep quiet.

"Grandpa, this is Germany. He's in my year at college." Russia broke through my thoughts.

"Well, you are independent now, yes?" Russian Empire asked his grandson.

"Sort of. We live on Mr. UK's island."

"Ah, Britain is a good man. Sometimes sour, but okay in general." Honestly, he was describing himself. "And you, boy, I thought I've

heard your name before. Are you related to German Empire?"

"Yes, sir." I instantly remembered what Russia told me about titles and braced myself for whole impact.

"Not sir. Tsar." His eyes darkened, but his smile still remained. "I'll forgive your ignorance this time around."

"Yes...Tsar."

"Good. Perfect. I wish everyone was as obedient." He clapped his hands lightly. Ever single word sounded like a compliment and an insult at the same time. But I didnt want to point it out. "You're his grandson, maybe?"

"Yes, Tsar."

"Hmm, German Empire only has two sons. Both are weird. One was too formal, too weak willed and too influenced. The other was just plainly a fiery pit of insanity. Don't know which is better."

"..." I had nothing to say. Now that he was closer to me, I could see how horribly the amethyst was set into his skin. I kept staring at it, thinking of how vain must you be to make yourself do that. It must've been painful, and it was in a dangerous place, right where many vital organs were at close proximity. He probably noticed me staring and he smirked.

"You like it?" He pointed to it. "Isn't it nice? It protected me from assassination once." He touched it softly, and I had the urge to throw up. "I had one set into my son's skin too. Just in a different place. A nice little emerald too. Now I think what a waste of gem that was." He tapped his foot impatiently and then adjusted his small crown on his head. "СССР, ты где? Did you die somewhere? That would be too fortunate." USSR came down slowly, like a killer to a tied victim. But Russian Empire was all smiles. He reached up to pat his son's head, and then wiped his hand on the couch arm. All of the grandchildren looked very uncomfortable, but none of them spoke or moved. Even Kazakhstan looked down and frowned. They all understood that it was supposed to be this way.

"I'm here," he said harshly.

"Don't be so mad. Tell me about your adopted son."

"His name is Germany. I took him in because I have a contract on a piece of his father's land. That's it." USSR said with clenched teeth.

"Ah, okay. Who's his father? That weak one? I think his name was Weimar something..."

"Third Reich," USSR muttered.

Realisation and interest flashed in the empire's eyes. "Ah, that little one. Yes...the one you li-,"

"Lied." USSR cut in fast. "I was lied to by him." He stood really close and threatened his father silently. His hands were itching to wrap around the Tsar's thin white throat.

Russian Empire loved seeing his son in total shock. He wrapped his fingers around the crook of the cane he held and nodded slowly."Yes, yes. Lied to. As well as something else. But it's too late to say it. Too many walls have ears you know." He chuckled cryptically. Who looked more shocked, USSR or Russia was had to say. "Ah, anyway, aside from *that*. I am tired from that horrible trip here. My car doesn't do too well in snow...and dirt roads. Have you prepared dinner? I hope so." He walked lightly over to the dining room, humming and examining the table, picking up one or two things, then putting them back. He went into the kitchen, humming even louder. USSR sighed exasperation filling the sound he made.

"As you can see," Russia said once we were out of his grandfather's earshot. "He's very oily. And vain. And frivolous. And kind of blind to everything going on. And he doesn't fear much."

"He doesn't fear anything," USSR growled.

"Yes he does," Russia said in a terse whisper. "He fears God."

USSR let out a little chortle. "Hah, that's hilarious."

"Is it always like this?" I asked Russia again.

"Yes." He nodded sadly. "But it gets better. He always softens up by the end. Probably this time it's a little worse because to him, you're a stranger. Don't worry, he doesn't do much but try to embarrass father. He'll stop soon enough once you stop looking surprised." He explained quietly and quickly. "If you don't pay it any attention, he'll definitely stop."

"Okay," I said unsure. "They won't drink right?"

"Oh they will." Russia's gaze darkened so that it looked like his grandfather's. "But not in front of my siblings. They have in front of me. They'll wait till my brothers and sister are asleep. Sooner or later, the liquor will be out."

"Drinking always ends up revealing bad secrets," I whispered nervously. "I'd rather them remain that way." Russia took my hands in his. This time, intentionally. His hands were warm and his grip was strong.

"Trust me," he whispered back. "I won't let him if you cannot bear to hear it."

"Thanks,"

He broke the hold with a firm shake. "Let's go. Try to enjoy the food. At least that will be nice..." He looked up at the light coming from the kitchen. "It was probably a mistake for you to come. You'd be happier of you'd stayed..."

"No. I would be miserable. Here, at least I have somebody to talk to." I reassured him. He seemed to brighten at this.

"Okay then," he made the cross quickly. "Welcome yourself to a typical Russian family dinner. The key word is family. So, enjoy."

"You sound as if you're not going to be there."

"We can't talk as freely," he cautioned. "So I'd rather warn you here. Come on," he motioned for me to follow him into the lit room. We sat down and I only realised that we were cornered in the middle of USSR and Russian Empire when they both sat on either side of us. Great. I desperately wanted to move, but it would look awkward.

Again, me and USSR were left out when everybody else prayed. Again, I looked down and pretended I didn't exist. I was getting good at that sort of thing. The food was spectacular this time. The slab of meat that I saw earlier was a rabbit, and it had a very nice and mild flavour that was more subtle than pork, and richer than beef. A bunch of baked vegetables were arranged around it nicely and a thick pumpkin soup went with it. There was also a farro, a mix of rice and vegetables that are baked, and a tureen of red caviar along with dark pumpernickel bread loaves. The dinner was nice, and soon enough I thought that Russia's warning was just an empty caution, but when Belarus and Ukraine brought out tea after the dinner, the Tsar started to talk.

"That was a nice dinner," he commented, stirring his porcelain cup with a spoon of sugar. Kazakhstan and Belarus were excused to go play in the living room and Ukraine was munching on a pryanik. There was a pot of green tea with herbs, plain black and a red hibiscus tea called Karkade. A piece of dry Napoleon cake went with it.

"Thank you." USSR said flatly, taking a spoon of cake and thinking it to be sugar, stirred it into his tea. After his realisation, he put his whole piece into the cup. Russian Empire sighed at his son.

"Tired?" He asked almost sincerely.

"Yes," the other replied. "Tired of everything."

"Well then...you should retire. Give it up. After all, you so desperately wanted to take it for yourself." I knew what he was talking about without him even dropping hints. Governance. He wanted his son to give up his governance.

"That will not happen...on my watch,"

"Suit yourself," his father huffed. "I'm not helping you."

"I didn't *ask* for help." USSR hissed. "I don't need help."

"Fine. Don't come crawling to me afterward." The Tsar raised his eyebrows with a haughty expression. His eyes searched the

surroundings and then befell me. Uh oh. "You, how do you like it here?"

"Um, pardon?" I said feebly. "I don't really understand what you mean..." I looked at Russia for help and he nodded slightly.

"He likes it here," Russia intervened. "He told me."

"He told you...interesting." His purple eyes looked like ones of a hawk. He gazed down at me for a moment and then spoke to his son.

"USSR, I thought you hated when your children step into relationships without your say so." He said slowly. My blood turned to ice. I didn't dare look at USSR's expression, but I heard his heavy breathing next to me. Suddenly, my cup of tea was very interesting and I looked nowhere else. I could feel the heat radiating from both sides. One defensive the other maddening.

"What?" USSR whispered, thankfully to his father. "What did you say?"

Russian Empire probably sensed danger. "Never mind, USSR."

"No no. What. Did. You. Say?" His son said. "Tell me. Now." Each time he said a word, his fist banged against the table. Ukraine sunk down under, obscured from view and slithered away quietly. I could hear my heartbeat pound in my throat.

"It will anger you," Russian Empire was suddenly the victim and he lost most of his grandiose instantly. I saw that he was just a scared man who liked to play with the fates of his subordinates.

"Oh, but tell me," USSR's voice was sweet like thick syrup.

"Son, I-,"

"Now."

"Son, please." USSR threw a knife in his direction. The unearthly sound that came out of the monarch's mouth was horrible. The knife sailed past him and into the huge clock behind him. It tilted a

little and then fell down slowly, just centimetres from his father. Russian Empire clutched at his neck, breathing heavily and shaking with fear. The clock next to him was broken in a million pieces and nobody moved for a moment. Then, USSR sat back down and started to help himself to more cake. Russia was staring into the wall next to me and I had lost my speech. "Ты сумашедший? Ты охренел?" Came the words from the Tsar's mouth, meant only for his son. His voice souded harsh, low and shocked.

"If you must mistreat me forever," USSR said calmly. "Then this will happen much more often."

"I always thought you were wrong. You're unwanted, you know. If you want sympathy, don't come to me. You killed your own mother. I hate you." With that, Russian Empire stood up and left, slamming the door to the room he was staying in. USSR didn't have a reaction to this, but merely ate more of the cake.

"Somebody has to clean this," he said aloud. "I can't have a broken clock in the middle of my dining room." He proceeded to finish the cake before he drained a whole pot of green tea and starting to pick up the shards of glass from the broken clock. Russia and I did the task of cleaning the table. Ukraine must've ushered Belarus and Kazakhstan to bed, because only we were awake. While we washed out the post and dishes, Russia bent his head low and sighed.

"I'm really sorry for what happened." He apologised. "That was very embarrassing and stupid of my grandfather and of me. I should've..."

"Its okay." I hugged him with my wet hands. "I'm glad you stood up for me."

After a moment he returned the hug. "Thank you."

"Of course."

"Just ignore what my grandfather says." Russia flicked his wrist dismissively. But I couldn't. Deep down, I felt like the old and snobbish empire could see though everything. He noticed a lot of things other did not. He noted what I've been doubting in myself for

so long...that little flicker of flame. I have become so confused with emotions for such a long time, that I don't understand what I feel towards who. But I do know one thing for certain. Me and Russia started to go deeper than friendship. And we both knew it.

Что стоишь? На, положи наверх. - what are you standing here for? Here, put this upstairs.

Хватит на меня смотреть, уходи. - stop staring at me and go away.

СССР, ты где? - USSR, where are you?

Ты сумашедший? Ты охренел? - are you crazy? Have you lost it?

Changing

[image]

Enjoy a short chapter on USSR's point of view. I decided to mix things up a bit.

Picking up all those little shards was hard. It was a shame to have to break such an expensive object. I could replace the glass later, but I had to fix the interior. Why couldn't my father keep his mouth shut? No, he has to stick his fingers into every bowl and remain on top at all times. I didn't actually think when I threw the knife. I was so angry to the point at which I couldn't bottle it all up. I had to destroy something. I have to admit, I cannot bring myself to harm my father, no matter how much he harmed me. After the clock fell, I felt infinitely better and the burning madness in my stomach was replaced by emptiness and hunger. I ate the remaining cake without saying a word. Next to me, I felt Germany struggling not to bolt out and Russia started at the wall in shock. Both of them shouldn't have seen this. I tried to act as if I didn't care. Inside, I was filled with guilt and I wanted to apologise. My father's breathing as coming out in short and jagged gasps. I wanted to say something but he didn't let me.

"Have you lost your mind?" He said slowly, standing up cautiously and then almost running up the stairs, slamming the door to the room behind him. Russia quietly offered to clear the table for me and he started without my response. Germany, still half paralysed with fear, took some plates, but his hands shook with fine tremors.

"I have." I whispered to myself as I picked up the fine little shards. "I have lost my mind. A long time ago." When I stood up, I wanted to go and put the little pieces into the trash, but I stopped. I saw them. Russia and Germany in an embrace. My breath hitched, and I felt like I was back in the war all over again. Silently, without attracting attention, I slumped down on the floor and groaned softly. *No, Russia*, I thought to myself. My logical mind told me that Germany

wasn't his father and he wouldn't ever betray anyone. But stigma still reigned and I kept retelling to myself what I've told Russia one million times. Trust is dangerous. Trust is dangerous. Trust is...dangerous. When they left the room and went upstairs, I went to a drawer and got out a toolbox to repair the internal mechanism damage. The whole time I thought about my father's words.

"I thought you hated when your children step into relationships without your say so." Came the haunting voice in my head. I had to shake it off. There was no relationship. They're just too different.

"Senile old man." I muttered under my breath. He embarrassed me completely in front of everyone and expected me to just shrug it off. Why does he care about my children and not about me? What is wrong in me that he doesn't like? What, that I 'stole' his government? Well, he hated me before that. He told me I murdered my mother. I couldn't have, I've never known her. All I know about her is the old painting in my father's palace and the little granite rock jutting out of the ground in a field. Now all he likes to do is put me in the light and break my image. What good would it do if I come out and tell everyone everything? That's right, none. I will live out my life in quiet suffering now, and then I can peacefully fade out of society and wipe my face off the map. Soon enough. The fine dust from the glass was flowing all around me and I had to open a window to let all the awful dust ridden air. After a long and frustrating time of fixing the clock, I stumbled over to the living room and searched the desk near the entrance. Wait...didn't I give up drinking? Yes, I did. No comfort in getting drunk then and not now either. Why was I even sad? I had to stop for a moment and stepped outside on the snowy doorstep to clear my head. I didn't know what I felt anymore. I have to arrange my emotions like a computer file. Life has become hard for me. Without Russia at home to spread out the workload, I have to balance out my actual job, the governance and domestic duties. I only get paid for my actual job, and the rest is free labour. Last time I left the country for a meeting, Britain joked if I wanted to donate my car to a museum. I thought that wasn't funny at all.

"Why don't people leave me alone?" I asked no one. The snow made the sky lighter and the low air pressure made me feel sleepy. I

locked the door twice, even though we were in the middle of nowhere and for some reason, I flopped down onto the carpet instead of the couch. I didn't move after I made myself comfortable. How would my father react tomorrow was giving me nighthawk. Eventually though, I fell into a turbulent sleep where I dreamt of being chased by everyone I've ever loved or wished or cared for. The scariest part was that they all took the form which I last remember them being. Then it all disappeared to be replaced with darkness.

"Papa," I heard a whisper in my ear. "Why are you in the floor?" I recognised Russia's voice. He was bent over me and rubbed my back affectionately.

"I just fell asleep that way," I groaned, slowly getting up.

"Oh, okay," he stayed kneeling on the floor, lost in thought. He looked up at me with his strange lavender eyes. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes....no." I didn't want to lie or scare my son.

He cocked his head to the side in confusion. "Is it a yes or no?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"Never mind!" I heard my voice rise. Russia bent his head low and said nothing more. Again, I felt guilty and went to hug my son. "Sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Papa, why don't you try to find somebody to live with," Russia reasoned.

"I cannot."

"Why? You'd be happier."

"No." I said firmly. "I wouldn't. I loved your mother, but she left me. That's all."

"Didn't you love somebody else afterward?"

"That is a different story, Russia." I broke out embrace. "One that you're too young to understand."

"I am not. I'm eighteen." He protested. "Legally an adult."

"Legally. But not mentally." I told him. "You won't understand, Russia. All I can say to you about that is that trusting is a dangerous game to play. I advise you to see all the points before you decide." I understood that Russia was confused with my cryptic speech. I was afraid that if I told him directly, he might reject everything. Maybe when my father leaves us alone. Speaking of said Tsar, he was climbing down the steps very carefully. He flinched when we made eye contact.

"Good morning grandpa," Russia said the first words.

"Good...morning," the other replied. He abandoned his grandiose look for a white shirt and flowing long pants. The amethyst still was visible even underneath the clothing.

"How did you sleep?" I asked.

"Badly," he looked away from me. "I was terrified the whole night." The surprising thing was that he was telling the whole truth. He didn't even make a single lie. Amazing. We heard the door click upstairs and Russia leaped away to see what was going on. I was left alone with my father. He looked at me with some doubt. "To put this in simple terms: I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say. Sorry for last night."

"I'm sure you are." I sighed. "But I don't want to hear it. Don't act as if you want to be fatherly all of a sudden. Because it won't work. I'm already too used to you being the way you are. I trusted you once, when I was little," I could see that he wanted to change and last night proved that he wished to father me all over again. "But you broke my trust. How can I hope again? Maybe soon, but not now. Definitely not now." He nodded, and left to the room with the glass walls. I went to heat up something for breakfast. Russia came down with Germany and tugged at my sleeve, asking they could help

somehow. I told them to start a fire. "In the fireplace." I hurried, before they got any ideas. "We're not going anywhere. Might as well do this." They laughed and set off to collect the firewood from outside. We'll see what happens, but I'm sure luck has to turn my way sometimes, right?

Live, Love, Learn

[image]

Things had become regular around the house as the new year came closer. Even though father and grandpa were acting very strange around each other, it was much welcomed as opposed to them throwing artichokes at each other...like last year. We made a little path to and from the forest by walking down it every day. I mostly did it to get out of the house and Germany accompanied me most of the time. I've decided that I trust him with my fears and we would constantly share them with each other. Some snow would fall and the clouds remained ever present in the sky. The low air pressure made us all sleepy, even in the morning. Father would regularly go to sleep in the middle of the day. I showed Germany our chickens and told him all their names. He liked our silkie chickens the most.

"They look like alpacas," he giggled as one chirped.

"They've been called a lot of things," I mused. "But never alpacas."

"Aren't they all cold?"

"They have feathers. Except our silkies, which have now a permanent home in Kazakhstan's room. We just let them out to walk for a little bit." I took one and pet it. "Aren't you special?" I cooed to it. It peeped happily in response, nuzzling me.

"You don't have a dog?"

"No. We used to. But then father gave it away...chickens are much better though. They're birds, but don't fly. They don't require much maintenance and they're cheap. On top of that, they bring eggs! If you play with them a lot they can snuggle with you as well."

"Wow," Germany picked up the other chicken we named Masha and we let them back in the house, into their box in Kazakhstan's room. The afternoon was when things came to a standstill in our household. Father was sleeping on the living room couch, Belarus

was taking a bath upstairs, Ukraine was playing with his cat and grandfather was reading the newspaper, occasionally writing down his opinion in the margins. Me and Germany sat down at the kitchen table and I started to teach him a card game. In a round he won.

"Yay," he said, placing down the winning card. I groaned and placed my own cards on the table. Behind the newspaper, grandfather let out a small laugh. He lowered the paper and started to write down his commentary on the paper. He's been nicer lately, but still looks at me and Germany with this knowing look. So does father. Ukraine also kept smirking when me and Germany ever were together, it didn't matter what we did. It sort of ruffled me, but I tried not to pay attention. A loud thump signified that father had fallen off the couch and was going to wake in a few seconds.

"Three...two...one," I counted off before I heard the swear out of my father's mouth.

"USSR, stop swearing in front of children," grandfather chided.

"They've heard all of them at school," father came in and poured himself a glass of water. "I'm sure the know worse words." He looked at me with a glint of laughter in his eyes.

"Never," I lied unconvincingly. Germany shook his head and sighed in an animated matter.

"Ah, Russia." Father looked outside. "Like I haven't heard you talk with your friends. Any way, can you take Kazakhstan outside? He really wants to, and he needs to be supervised."

"Of course," I stood up and took Germany with me. It wasn't like I was going to stay outside alone. That would be boring. "Kazakhstan! Let's go outside!"

"YAY!" Out of nowhere, he flew down and hugged me warmly before going upstairs again and getting his stuff. I helped him put on his coat and boots and then he waddled outside, falling into the snow with a delighted squeal. Me and Germany took our own things and steeped outside, watching Kazakhstan start to build a

wall out of snow.

"Your family isn't bad," Germany said out of the blue. "I mean, you keep apologising for them, but I think they're great. Maybe you'll have a fight or a bad experience, but you stay together. I wish I had siblings. And a father that doesn't coddle you around." He smiled when Kazakhstan threw a snowball and it landed about ten centimetres away from us.

"I know," I said, watching my breath rise up like smoke. "I shouldn't complain. You probably had it worse."

"Not exactly. I would say just amplified."

"How so?" I questioned. Then a snowball hit me in the face. "KAZAKHSTAN!"

"Yes?" He peeped over his wall of snow. He was trying not to laugh.

"Don't throw snow in my face! Anywhere but my face!"

"That's exactly where he'll try to hit you." Germany laughed. "But on our conversation, my father would always be either edgy, angry or too loving. The whole day he would be gone, and he would come late at night. Sometimes, he'd yell at me for staying up so long, but then he would go to sleep with me. In the morning, he would be gone already, and the cycle goes like that. Kind of boring."

"Did you travel a lot?"

"Sometimes," he thought for a moment. "Yes. We did. My dad did his campaigns all over and he would take me and my tutor along. Sometimes not and I would stay with my really old great grandfather. He's actually still alive, but doesn't talk to us much."

"Oh, that's kind of sad."

"Don't be sad, Russia," he turned to me, his amber coloured eyes sympathetic. "I love your family. With its quirks and strangeness. It feels like a real one. Mine felt artificial and fragile. Yours is much like an iron chain. You may rust over, but it can always be removed. Just my opinion."

I took his hands in mine. "Thank you. I never really saw it that way." Our moment was spectacularly ruined by two snowballs that flew into our faces.

"KAZAKHSTAN!" We both yelled in shock and laughter.

"Kazakhstan won!" He came out of his snow wall and came up to us. "Can we go walk?"

"Sure," I said, wiping the snow off of my face. Germany tucked his glasses into his pocket, since there was no effective way to dry them off. We walked along the path with Kazakhstan flying above the treetops.

"Wouldn't it be great to fly?" Germany wished aloud watching Kazakhstan in-flight.

"No. Not really." I responded. "The time involving preening, washing and trimming would drive me mad. And also I would have to cut holes in the clothing for them. Let's not forget when Kazakhstan had some sort of wing infection and he had to have four injections. That must've been fun."

"Mm, never mind. That does sound like much." He nodded in agreement.

"It's a lot of responsibility. He has to do it all by himself. Sometimes I help him with preening, but mostly it's like a one man show."

"Russia..." Germany was about to say the words I've heard many times.

"Yes, yes. I know," I sighed. "I'm bad at comparing." He laughed and we both got smothered in a blanket of snow from a pine tree.

"KAZAKHSTAN!" I yelled again, frustrated from the amount of snow that went under my hood and onto my skin. Up above, my little brother was giggling from happiness and way out of reach.

"How do we got him down?" Germany asked. "See, that's a plus he has."

"Don't worry. We'll use the old fashioned method." I whistled. "Kazakhstan! Guess what?" I tried to make my voice high pitched and scared. It got his attention, and he flew nearer.

"What?"

"I think I saw *бабай*!" I looked over to see Germany trying to suppress an involuntary smile. "Over there." The effect was magical. Kazakhstan zoomed down and wrapped his arms around mine, his eyes wide and scared.

"No!" He whispered frightened. "Where?"

"He was about to fly up and grab you! But I saw him and I told you before he could come." Beside me, Germany was smiling stupidly and trying not to laugh.

"I'll walk then," Kazakhstan took my hand and we walked till the edge of the forest. Occasionally, we could see a deer running by, or a bird fluttering off with a warning call, but the snow had smothered the rest of the sounds in a blanket of silence. Once we reached the edge, where we could see the twisted apple tree, eternally looking over the grassy small hills to the little village that stood just beyond our land. I let Kazakhstan flutter around a bit on the winds.

"I kind of wanted to ask...do you have a grandmother?" Germany said awkwardly next to me. After my silence, he quickly added. "You don't have to answer."

"She died...a long time ago." I watched Kazakhstan loop around. "Protecting my father when he was a baby. She was kind of ill after she gave birth...and then..."

"Oh,"

"My grandfather kind of has a mutual hate of my dad...as you may have noticed. Not all the time, but he does behave like he's on top of the world. Especially when he inherited more money from our great grandmother. After that, he became intolerable. I don't know what this weird neutral thing going on is about...but I'm not

complaining."

"Well, at least your grandfather stayed with you...and didn't just run off to grow cacti." His words can out bitter.

"True. You are right. My grandfather substitutes cacti. He is one." He cracked an involuntary smile. "Ah, but your grandfather does stuff. Mine just complains and tries to make himself into gemstone statue."

"Did he actually *set* a stone into his skin?"

"Yes. The one that you saw on his chest is an older one. The first one he did actually."

"He has more?" Germany looked sick at the fact.

"Unfortunately, yes. He has three. Two more on his upper arms near his shoulders. Why does he do it? No idea. It's painful and they get infected sometimes. You won't find me doing that."

"I wonder what he thinks of me."

I shrugged in reply. "Probably not much. What's annoying I'd that he keeps looking at me with this knowing look...how do I know what he's trying to say?"

"Russia!" Kazakhstan interrupted. "I'm cold!"

"Okay! Let's go home then!" Then I added to Germany quietly. "If he gets wet feet, that's the end of us." He shook his head and we left the ground, along with the conversation we had there. I wouldn't hear any more talk about family till only after our winter break. We stepped into the house from the door in the back, where we could take off our wet clothes without tracking it though the house. We came into the main part of our house and saw Belarus, who finished her bath, talking to grandfather on the couch. He was now filing his nails and listening to Belarus chatting on his lap.

"Grandpa, you should be like Mr. Austria-Hungary!" She was in the middle of a conversation. "He talks on the TV and the radio. You should too!" The two men had something in common. Mostly that

they lived though a lot and they didn't care about people's feelings. I honestly don't know much about Austria Hungary, so I have to keep an open mind. Grandfather was playing along to Belarus' talk.

"And what would I do?"

"Fashion!" She pointed to his clothing. "You have nice clothes," I saw father shaking from laughter in the kitchen, half listening to the talk in the living room.

"Eh, I don't like cameras,"

"But you'd be good at it!"

"No no Belarus...Fashion isn't my thing."

"Then jewellery," she lightly brushed his amethyst. "I like your purple diamond."

He took her hand away from his neck. "It's an amethyst. Not purple diamond. And I don't like to wear too much of it any way." He finished his filing and shooed her away.

"I would." Belarus jumped down from his lap. "Maybe I'd do it along with being a Bioinformatics scientist." Then she went to talk to Kazakhstan, trying to persuade him to dress up in her jewellery.

"Bioinformatics scientist?" Germany was surprise that she could even say the words.

"She's an ambitious girl," father leaned against the door frame, polishing a glass. "And she knows what she wants." He retreated back into the kitchen and turned on the radio. I could see the annoyance flash on grandfather's face, but he just stood up and left without a word or a scandal. We went to see what father was doing, consequently getting stuck helping him cut vegetables. Germany was trying hard not to cut himself, while making the slices of eggplant really thin. The radio was a mix of music and news broadcasting, and most of it was of the happening outside the borders of father's governance. I was surprised to hear that Mr. UK had made the break three days longer to resolve a family issue. I silently thought of what could've happened.

"Uh oh," Germany whispered to me. "Does he mean 'America issues'?"

"Probably," I said back.

"Hopefully nothing is too bad," he looked outside, then back at his poor cutting. "I'm bad at this."

Father inspected our work. "It's fine. Either they'll eat it or go hungry."

"What about grandpa?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"I've given up on pleasing the Tsar." He snickered. "There always has to be a complaint." He let us go, and we left to the room with the glass. I have started to call it that. We sat on the floor and looked out of the window, watching the wind occasionally picking up the snow and sending it across the field in a flurry. It was very beautiful.

"You know...I think you're like snow." Germany said.

"How so?" I didn't turn to him but kept on watching the outside.

"Well...you're really cold on the outside, when untouched." He looked over to me. "But when somebody takes you, the warmth makes you melt. I always thought you were a tough and always serious person, when we first met. Now, I don't."

"You don't find me serious?"

"Well, you are. Around other people." He continued. "But one on one, or with your family, you're not like that. I think that's funny."

"I guess."

"The thing is...I've tried to treat you like a sibling. But it isn't working out. I'm just...I don't know." He looked down at his hands. Then he sighed and buried his hands in his face. For a moment, I thought he was crying because he was shaking. But he was actually laughing. "I can't say it."

"Say what?" I thought that sounded kind of stupid after I said it.

"Oh Russia." He composed himself. "I kind of...like you. Not like a sibling." Silence greeted him. I think I went red, because he started to laugh. I looked away and he laughed louder. I think he was just happy he said it, because I've never heard him laugh like that. When he stopped and wiped the tears from his eyes, I hugged him.

"I think I do too."

The Third Truth

[image]

It felt so good to get the words out of my mouth. I broke into a hysterical laughter when I did. Russia was blushing badly and it felt like I was floating. The words were weighing me down like stones, and now I felt free like a bird.

"I do too," he hugged me and we stayed like that for a minute.

"I can't believe I said that." I whispered.

"I can." He smiled. "It was very brave of you to say that."

"I wanted to beat you to it." I responded. The room felt warmer, or maybe it came from the kitchen. He took a piece of mint gum from his pocket and chewed on it and then immediately spat it back into the wrapper. It was old, I guess. We watched the scene for a bit longer till Ukraine came in and leaned on Russia's back.

"Dinner is ready," he announced.

"Okay."

"Did you guys kiss or something?" He asked without remorse.

"Uh, no." Russia pushed him away and stood up.

"Then why is your face red?"

"Because it's always red," he snapped. "It's my flag colour."

"Uh huh," Ukraine nodded slowly. He didn't engage further in

conversation but was smiling. I followed the two brothers out and into the dining room, where almost everyone was seated. I washed my hands under scalding water, and went back, with my hands throbbing from the heat. Russian Empire was looking at the food with a mixture of revulsion and abhorrence. He was wearing a fancy navy blue blazer this time. Again, they prayed and soon everyone was eating. The dish was fried eggplants and zucchini with tomatoes topped with squash caviar. There were also cabbage pies on a dish. Russian Empire saw that there was no choice and he half heartedly ate the eggplants. I could see USSR smirk next to me. The meal was mostly unremarkable, except for when Belarus 'accidentally' dropped caviar on Ukraine's head when he reached for a cabbage pie.

"Беларусь!" He whined. USSR wiped the stuff off his head, while Belarus looked smug. When we finished, Ukraine and Belarus washed the dishes and that left me, Russia, USSR and Russian Empire all alone in silence. And Kazakhstan, but he was staring into his cup, trying to catch the carrots he dumped in it. His little game ended when his glass tipped over and spilled across the tablecloth.

"Oops," he said, guilty. He ate his carrots and left to wash his cup. A light aluminium tray with fruit substituted the main course now, and I absently chewed on a slice of honeydew. Russia picked off strawberries regularly. Russian Empire drummed his fingers slowly and had a sour expression on his face. We were sitting the exact same way when did the first time we dined. USSR seemed to be bored, but he didn't want to be the first to leave, so he kept looking around and then down at his hands, before his eyes travelled back to us. On our other side, Russian Empire was dropping obvious hints to try to catch USSR's attention without words. Eventually, he sighed and spoke.

"USSR, do you have tea?"

"Just tea?" The other replied, seemingly still in trance.

"Unless you have something else."

"Tea without something is not good."He heaved himself off of his chair and went for the kettle. "I would only drink plain tea in the

morning."

"Well, your poor substitution here needs something to go with it," Russian Empire flicked his wrist towards the tray of fruit. He somehow acquired a thick gold bracelet and strapped it onto his right wrist, along with the several expensive rings. They looked too nice to be just fashionable. He must've been really popular when he was younger. I counted five on his right hand. They were diamond encrusted, each a different style, and there was even one with a ruby on it. I paid attention to USSR's hands when he came back with the kettle. I never actually looked closely at his hands before. He had two on his right hand and a thin golden one on his left. One was obviously for Russia's mother. The other two were probably from when he was in his twenties. Unlike his father, USSR didn't like jewellery, and wouldn't wear it without a reason.

"Here." He said, placing the kettle in front of Russian Empire. "Your tea. I don't have any more green left."

"Great." Russian Empire raised his chin and poured himself a cup, snatching the last strawberry from under Russia's hand. The latter sighed and moved on to devouring the blueberries. USSR took a pear slice and nibbled on it for a while. I didn't really want to break the silence, so I went along and also ate off the tray. Unfortunately, there was only so much fruit, and with the four of us wanting to be occupied eating, the fruit was gone by the end.

"Well." USSR huffed when the last pear piece was gone.

"Well *what*?" Russian Empire said. "I can't even go outside. It's so windy."

"Sorry. I can't control the weather."

"I'm so glad." I was preparing myself for another fight, but they calmed down and we sat in a terse silence again till Kazakhstan came in.

"Papa!" He cried in happiness.

"What Kazakhstan?"

"Can Belarus make pie with me and Ukraine?" He asked with round eyes. "Please?"

"Can she?" USSR raised his eyebrows in question. "Can she bake pie?"

He thought hard for a moment. "May Belarus bake pie?"

"Fine." He let him go. "Just don't burn yourselves."

"Belarus is making pie out of Kazakhstan and Ukraine?" Russia said next to me.

"He said with," USSR sighed. "With, not out of." Russian Empire took off his blazer to reveal a white dress shirt with the top two buttons undone. Of course. USSR looked away when his father started to fiddle with the buttons. Russia excused himself to use the bathroom. Good time, Russia. I wished I'd thought of that. By the look of his face, he just wanted to get out of the dining room.

"How do you like it here, Germany?" Russian Empire asked me. Yay me.

"Um, I like it. It's...nice. Cosy." I stammered.

"I assume you're not used to country life, eh?" He looked over me.

"Um. I like the change of scenery." Thank goodness Ukraine came in and interrupted the conversation.

"Pie's done!"

"That fast?" USSR asked.

"Yes. We put the oven on maximum."

"Brilliant." Ukraine sat back down and listened to our conversation until Russia came back and sat down. He waited till USSR came back and with a smile had to announce to everyone an important fact.

"You know that Russia kissed Germany?" He blurted out. Russia

facepalmed and his grandfather's eyes became wide. I tensed up next to USSR, who was the only one who didn't have a reaction.

"Ukraine, stop telling lies," he said calmly.

"He's lying papa," Russia cut in automatically. Belarus brought in a strawberry filled pie and sat down next to Ukraine, looking proud of her work.

"Who's telling lies?" She asked.

"Ukraine," me and Germany said simultaneously.

"Typical." She cut herself a piece of the pie and started to eat. Ukraine probably expected a reaction from his father, and was sullen when he didn't. Russian Empire though, kept looking at us, as if to prove that his grandchild was right. We talked for a bit, mostly small talk, and then USSR asked me and Russia to come for a walk outside.

"I kind of want to smoke," he shoved a cigarette pack into his breast pocket and waited for us to put on something warm. We left the light house and walked along the path. The wind died down a little and the only sound was our footsteps. USSR lit a cigarette quickly and let the smoke out of his mouth.

"I want you two to listen." He started. "Remember when I told you about that important thing Russia?" The latter nodded. " well, I'm going to say it now."

"Why did you ask us both to come?" Russia asked his father.

"Because I knew you'd take Germany along anyway." He replied. Russia cowered away from his father but the other just sighed. "Don't pretend. I may be old, but I'm not blind or stupid yet. I know and I see."

"See what?"

"Kids these days," he muttered to himself. "Let me finish, Russia." He stubbed out the cigarette on the ground.

"Sorry."

"I see what I think I do. I see what could've been my life in you, you know." He went along, taking Russia's and my hands in his. "I used to hug a German like that too." Realisation surged though me. USSR saw us that night. He saw Russia in himself and me in my father. I looked up at him to find his green eyes boring into mine. They weren't angry, just empty and sad.

"But...I'm not.." I tried to form words. Russia looked a bit sorry for me.

"I'm not accusing you," USSR said gently. "I just took you two to say this. I needed to say this. To say that my path looked a little like yours."

"History doesn't repeat itself, papa." Russia tugged at his sleeve. "But it can rhyme. We won't start a war. Times are different and things change."

"I know."

"So why are you so worried?" Russia challenged.

"Because I'm an old man, Russia." His father replied. "I worry about everything. Including things that I shouldn't be worried about." Russia leaned on his father's arm as we walked onward, away from the light of the house. I couldn't even see in now. We passed the crooked apple tree and made our way down the small slope. At the edge of the territory, we stopped at a rusty old blue mailbox, and USSR took some letters out of it. "Bills, bills, bills, coupons, Latvia's letter, and a packet of freeze dried fruit." He counted off things in his mailbox. We marched on, this time going west and stopping at a place where the trees made sort of a semicircle. It wasn't a memorable place, and apart from some weeds and a dried flower next to a rock, nothing was there.

"Where *are* we?" I asked him.

"Can't you guess?" He said. "This is where the dead sleeps." Russia realised what his father was talking about and looked at me with

scared eyes. I had absolutely no idea what was going on and I knelt down next to the rock. I stood up once I saw my father's symbol scratched into the dirt next to the rock. My mind reeling, I stepped away from it to bump into USSR. In truth, I was kind of scared of the place knowing that my father took his last breaths here. My mind played tricks on me and everything I saw around looked distorted and angry. The little breeze felt like a howl and the trees bent down to challenge me.

"Why did you take us here?" Russia was trying to make himself smaller somehow, to hide from the invisible spirits roaming around. USSR looked calmly at his son and shook his head. The latter was definitely scared of the place, the way his eyes darted to and fro.

"To make sure to not repeat this," he pointed at the rock and then at himself. "That's all."

"I don't understand you anymore!" Russia seemed to break. "What is *this*? You take us to Germany's father's gravesite, say something of a prophecy and expect us to understand? Well I don't! Why don't you talk to me? It feels like you're the one that died along with him." He cried out, tears in his eyes. Now I understood the whole story. Pieces came together and it all made sense. How strange. USSR and my dad had a sort of relationship like me and Russia now. My dad betrayed USSR and invaded his lands. Unfortunately for my dad, that backfired and he was left to USSR's mercy. He was killed here, by Russia's father who felt no more. The ability to communicate clearly was also probably lost. Now USSR fears for me and Russia.

"I understand now!" I yelled over them both. "I know what you mean!" Russia stopped and looked at me. "Sorry, but Russia is right. Your problems were caused by a war. Our problems are different, but nevertheless still serious. Our generation strives to understand rather than conquer. Killing won't happen, but lack of communication can." USSR looked relieved that I understood and we left the site.

"Do you understand, Russia?" He asked him quietly. His son nodded in response and gasped loudly, wanting to say something but failing. At the mailbox, with some effort, he took Russia in his arms. I guessed that Russia had grasped his father's words and had

stopped sobbing, but tears still came out of his lavender eyes. When we almost reached the house, he let himself down and desperately tried to stem the flow of tears. I wanted to comfort him somehow, but not in front of his father.

"Don't try to dry them up." USSR told him. "Just go up quietly. I'll say that you're tired." When he left, USSR took another cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "Why'd he get so unglued like that?"

"Maybe he was scared?" I heard a hint of challenge in my voice. I didn't mean for that.

"I guess." The smoke made a ring around him. "Too soon or too much?"

"Too much." I responded. "Russia has a problem with emotions."

"I know that. He's told me already." He looked into the window of the house. "I guess you should go too. It's cold out."

"Okay."

"Tomorrow is a new day," he finished. "Tomorrow we can forget this happened. At least I got what I needed out. Took me thirteen years," he stood outside whole I came in. Russian Empire looked at me when I entered from the front.

"Why was Russia crying?" He asked.

"USSR told him a sad story," I half lied. It kind of was a sad story, but I left out the parts about me and my dad. No need to talk about that.

"A sad story, huh?" He narrowed his eyes.

"Yes," I retreated slowly upstairs. "Very sad. Good night."

"Good night." With that, I locked myself in the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Wow, I had a terrified look on my face. I think that today was a hard day. A day of confessions, realizations and truths. At least now we could proceed calmly on.

Беларусь - Belarus

Well, this was an intense chapter...kind of what the backstory was about and how USSR plays into this. I promise that the next chapter will be a bit lighter. Thank you for reading the book thus far! I appreciate it!

Walking

[image]

I woke up like from a bad dream. The dried tears on my face felt like a tight mask, and I walked out quietly to wash it off. It seemed pretty early, because not even Belarus was up yet. When I finished, I crept back, changed my clothing, snatched my ushanka off of the nightstand, and went downstairs. My stomach was empty and I felt a little sick. *Nerves*, I though to myself. I must be influenced by my emotions so much they make me ill. I opened the fridge to rummage around for some food and a stomach tablet. After making a decent breakfast out of dark bread, cold salmon and chives, I sat down at the table and thought for sometime. The day was nice, and even though it was still semi dark, I could see that today the sky would be cloudless and the air pressure would be high. The white cabinets and back wall shined from the east side where the sun was coming up. Last night was terrible, I thought to myself. At least you got it all figured out, a little voice in my head whispered. I heard a little creaking from the stairs and thought it might be Belarus coming down. I was wrong, and Germany came into the kitchen.

"Good morning," he said quietly, sitting down opposite of me.

"Hi," I was probably inaudible, because he looked me over.

"Are you okay?" He asked me. "From yesterday....?"

"Not really," I admitted. "To be honest, I'm always a bit fearful when I see something directly connected to...your father."

Germany seemed unfazed by that. "That's okay. I won't lie about it, but I was kind of nervous yesterday too. Your dad was pretty up

and in front about this issue."

"At least I'm not the only one," I smiled weakly. He nodded in response but said nothing. I could hear a bird chirp in the fields outside, and the sky was now a light blue with whispy clouds. Belarus came down, and was surprised to see that people were already awake.

"Hello!" She bounced into the kitchen and set a pot of water on the stove. "Why are you all up so early?"

"Uh, I can't sleep," I said with a bit of annoyance in my voice.

"Are you sick?" She prompted, pointing at the tablet next to me.

"No. I don't need this anymore, actually." I pushed it away from myself. Today she was wearing a long and flowing dark blue skirt and a cotton blouse. Her little bare toes poked out from the bottom of the navy material. She moved across the kitchen with a purpose, and took a handful of grapes and ate it while walking around the room, and doing things singlehandedly.

"Papa said to me that we'll be going out today," she took out a bowl of porridge and handed it to me and one to Germany from a steel pot on the floor.

"Where?"

"Not anywhere special, somewhere around," she waved her hand dismissively. "Maybe to the barn at the edge."

"That's way too far away," I argued. "Guess who won't survive that trip?"

Belarus probably caught on, even though she was never biased against grandfather. "Well, we can't mope around here for too long. Too many people and too little space." While she was talking, father came in. We looked at him expectantly, but he didn't drop any hints about last night.

"Good morning," he looked at us. "You're up early today."

"Couldn't sleep," I muttered. He raised his eyebrows, but thankfully stayed silent. He talked to Belarus about where we would go as soon as everyone else woke. It was decided without our input that we will be walking across our territory to the far south edge where we had a large and old barn. The walk would be long and I knew that grandfather would be the first to complain about his joints...like he had any problems with them. We've walked that path before, and it was very enjoyable last time. How nice it would be in the snow was the question.

"I guess we're going to the barn at the southern border," I told Germany.

"Isn't that far?"

"Not as far as you think," I said back. "Not too far south. We just call it the southern border, but in reality it's not. Just in walking distance."

"Oh, okay."

"It should be a good walk." I considered. The Tsar came in, grumbling a good morning and pouring himself a cup of coffee that he took out of Belarus' hands. Father looked him up and down and announced his plans. Grandfather snapped out of his sleepiness when he heard the word 'walk'.

"Not going," he declared.

"Why not?" Father asked, opening one of the windows and lighting a cigarette.

"I don't like walking," he answered curtly. "Especially with you,"

"Oh, *please*," father looked harassed for a moment. "It's not long."

"Mm, yes it is," grandfather didn't like his son arguing with him.

"Fine, stay then," father said calmly. When he smoked he was usually very relaxed and didn't argue a point too long. "Just don't wreck my house."

"Sure," grandfather looked as if that was the first thing he was going to do. "When are you leaving?"

"Soon enough," father shut the window and stubbed his cigarette out in an ashtray. "We don't need much. Just a warm coat and a hiking stick. The bare minimum." He left to go upstairs, calling for Kazakhstan and Ukraine to wake up. Belarus finished her things and sat down next to me to eat her oatmeal topped with one hundred different things including raspberries and grape leaves. She left soon after without conversation to get ready. Germany looked back at me with a flash of hope in his eyes. Today just might turn things around.

"Good morning!" Kazakhstan skidded into the kitchen very gracefully, face-planting into the large open pot of porridge. I had to stifle a laugh as he slowly got up, unable to say a word. Grandfather was grimacing, and Germany looked away, slightly shaking form silent laughter. "Never mind." Kazakhstan's voice was barely audible under the mask of overnight oats. He licked most of it off before Ukraine and father came in, and looked guilty at his disgrace. Ukraine wiped his brother's face with a look of disgust and sat down, looking tired.

"Доброе утро," he yawned.

"Доброе," grandfather fished out a new newspaper and looked through the breaking news section. "Very good morning."

"Why do I have to get up so early?" Ukraine was passed a bowl of porridge with flakes of dried strawberries on top.

"Because we're going walking!" Belarus came in, all dressed up and ready. She switched out her long skirt for a pair of khaki pants and a pink turtleneck. Her strange blue hand made owl shaped rucksack was swaying slightly in her hand. "Isn't that fun?"

"I'm dying to go..." Ukraine yawned again.

Three hundred hours later we make it outside. So much for being

quick. Germany, Belarus and I were the only ones ready, apparently. It took five cigarettes, two pushes and six yells to get Ukraine out of the house. Finally with no more patience, father lugged Kazakhstan out by the collar. We started to walk in the other direction of the dreaded mailbox, and I already felt like this was a good idea. We fell into rows of two, with father and Belarus leading the way. Kazakhstan unfurled his wings but only to catch the breeze, as well as making sure they flapped in Ukraine's face the whole time. After the house disappeared along the whispering fields of wheat and rye, we entered a large patch of forest that father didn't cut trees from. Here, the conifers were thick and the brambles caught on to clothing from either side. Occasionally snow would fall from a heavy branch in the distance, or a distant howl could be heard. The pines blocked most of the sounds and the silence was sweet. The uncleared path which we walked was filled with soft snow, and we easily made our way across thanks to the two pairs of feet that had already made a row of footsteps. In front of us, Kazakhstan started to get chatty and talked nonsense to Ukraine.

"Hey, Украина, guess what?" He said.

"What?" The other replied dryly.

"Did you know that bacon grows on Palm trees?"

"What? No, Kazakhstan. That's not true."

"And that blueberries fly at night,"

"Blueberries don't fly at all..." Ukraine faceplamed. "They don't even have brains."

"Yes they do! I heard one at night." He kept on chirping.

"Kazakhstan! Stop making things up." Ukraine was irritated by his brother's mindless chatter. "It's annoying." Apparently, that was an optional statement.

"Did you also know that the babies on the soap are what the soap is actually made from?" Kazakhstan whispered.

"Who told you that?"

"Papa," he pointed to father. "He said if I run away, I'll be turned into soap."

"Seriously?" Ukraine huffed. "Well, that might be true."

"See? Then blueberries must fly as well!"

"Oh my god, Kazakhstan. I'm going to strangle you." Ukraine muttered under his breath.

"Is this usual?" Germany asked me.

"Definitely," I nodded. "It's kind of Ukraine's fault for getting angry. If he just ignored it, then Kazakhstan would stop. No, he's giving him attention..."

"But he knows all of that isn't true?"

"Of course. Kazakhstan isn't as cute and ignorant as you might think." I said. "He always knows what's good and what's not. As well as how much value he can get from keeping secrets. He has a lot of street smarts. How he got them is a question." He shrugged in response.

"Maybe he was born that way."

"Nobody is born with street smarts," I countered.

"I certainly wasn't," he laughed. "And never learned them either."

"You don't fit the type."

"Really?" He looked over the edge of his glasses. "I'm sure not." We came to the edge of the long stretch of forest to a short little walk along boulders before we got to a birch wonderland. I took Germany's hand and guided him along the rocks. He didn't break the hold even after we left the huge mounds of stone behind. I was starting to think that he actually *liked* holding my hand. Even though it was a little sweaty. The birches were all bare, and looked breathtakingly beautiful against the snow. The little black markings one the trunks were like little holes out of which somebody watched us trespass upon their silent kingdom. Germany was trying

to fall into a steady walk with my pace, but was failing constantly. Instead, I shortened my stride to match his. Nobody in front of us paid any attention to this, which was welcomed by me. Father really never got over me with Cyprus. I didn't tell him that I email her regularly and we're mutual friends now. I can have my secrets too.

"Do you like birch trees?" I asked Germany.

"Yeah, they're very nice." He replied, stopping to touch the bark.

"Ukraine likes to make juice out of them."

"Really? Does it taste good?"

"It's like water. Nothing special."

"Hmm, you have to let me try some," he peeled off a piece of thin bark and we went on.

"We still have some left from autumn." I watched him fold a little plane out of it. "But you'll find that it's not worth all the time to make it." He launched his little creation, which kind of unfurled in little time and hit Ukraine. I laughed, but Germany cupped his hand over his mouth.

"Sorry!" He said.

"That's fine," Ukraine looked over at us, at our hands and then turned away. I guess Kazakhstan was keeping him busy.

"Russia! Did you know that when we eat honey, it's bee vomit?" Kazakhstan suddenly interjected.

"That's nice," I replied.

"Isn't that disgusting?" He widened his eyes.

"A little. But it still tastes good," I shrugged as if I didn't care. Ukraine was the opposite. His face was contorted in a mix of disgust, annoyance and anger.

"Now who told you that?" He said, sour that his honey experience was ruined. "That's horrible."

"Like you didn't know." I smirked.

"Belarus told me. She read it in a book." Kazakhstan said, matter of fact. "She also read this one thing about cockroaches..."

"BELARUS! Stop reading books!" Ukraine yelled. "And telling Kazakhstan all about it!"

"Just a regular day," I said with a smile. Germany pressed his face into my arm and laughed. I took my arm and wrapped it around him instead. After a bit, he leaned his weight on me.

"You can carry me now." He murmured.

"No way," I pushed him lightly off. "You have legs."

"Mm, you might be right," he nodded slowly.

"Indeed I am." Inside, I felt bubbly. Kind of like when five year olds get sweets. It was calming to be around Germany. I don't even know why. It wasn't maddening love or deep joy. It was almost like sitting by a quiet lake in the summertime with the water reflecting off the scene like glass. And I welcomed that.

Доброе утро - good morning

Доброе - Good/short response back to a good morning

Украина - Ukraine

I hope this chapter was enjoyable! A lot of inspiration comes from a conversation between my father and brother had at the dinner table.

The Barn and the Little Things

[image]

"The barn," Russia pointed to the distant figure, a brown speck among the white mounds. We had been walking for some time now, and the scenery changed from the tall and stubborn pines to a quiet birch forest, and now the last stretch of leafless trees were behind us. As we came closer, I wondered why everyone referred to the place as the 'barn'. It certainly wasn't one. It was more of a ramshackle cabin, complete with windows, a doorstep, and a chimney. To my best guess, it took is about an hour and a half to reach this destination. We moved at a relatively fast pace, and I silently thanked Russian Empire for not coming. He would probably be complaining by now.

"This is kind of far," I commented.

"A little," Russia looked at the building. "But we used to come here so often...it's like reliving childhood."

"Mm, I understand,"

"We used to come here every summer till I went to secondary school." He added. "Then we didn't have time or we went somewhere else. I also took summer jobs and internships, so this place was basically forgotten." My suspicions of it being a cabin were correct. USSR stepped onto the creaky raised platform that was sort of a porch and fished out his keys, counting and recounting them till he found the correct one. After rotating it in the lock twice and an eye roll from Russia later, he rammed his side into the door to open it. The smell of old things coated my nose. USSR sneezed from the dusty atmosphere and quickly opened a window to let the particles out. The wooden floor was covered in an ornate green carpet, and the couch, hard backed wooden chairs and thin silken

shades were all dim hues of green. The opposite side facing the windows had a large Soviet flag hung from the wall. USSR hummed to himself as he fed logs into the sparks of fire. I noticed that he liked to make fires instead of relying on a heat system in regular houses. Soon enough, the place was warm and cosy. I tiptoed into the room adjacent, and was surprised to see two walls covered in bookshelves of old books. An animal skin was draped on the wood floor. A stool stood in the corner near a little window.

"Isn't this place nice?" Belarus came in. "Russia so loves it here."

"Seems to be," I said, when Russia came in and opened the window. He had a smile on his face, one that was light and happy. He led me though the small rooms of the house, describing in detail what he liked and didn't about each one. The last room had a beautiful plafond with a pattern almost like a rug.

"This one is one of the nicest," he showed me the plafond with pride. "It took months to set this in."

"Did this use to be your home?" I asked.

"Not really," he clarified. "When our old home was demolished, we had to rebuild it. Hence, we lived here for a bit. I got attached to this place and begged father to not chop it up for wood. As you can see, he heeded. Now he's glad that he did."

"Why do you call it the barn?"

"Its kind of like a code name. Sort of like the house is called the Nest. It's not a secret or anything, but we've gotten so used to calling it that, why stop?"

"Oh, I kind of thought we'd be going to an actual barn..."

"We have those, but not too many. Around the middle region, mostly. But that's way too far away to go on foot. We haven't even reached the southern border."

"Large territory," I remarked.

"Yes, father likes his space. Especially after the war. He increased

his territory size by thirty hectares more. We don't know why, but whatever. I don't mind it. I like the isolated lands."

"I see why you don't like the city then," I laughed.

"Now you understand," he nodded. "Too noisy. You'll see when we come back. The noise will be unbelievable."

"I'll be so happy," he laughed at my response. He was so much more chatty, bubbly and spontaneous here. Would he change when we went back to the island? Would he return to his moody, ever serious and difficult to connect like when I met him? He must've seen that I was lost in thought because he stopped his talk and faced me.

"What are you thinking about?" Russia, blunt as usual.

"Nothing,"

A sly smile played on his lips. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Definitely not." I dropped my life. "I was wondering if you'd change when we came back to the island." He looked at me for a moment and then shrugged. I could see that he was deciding his answer.

"I personally thought about it. If you mean to everyone around, probably yes. Especially America and Iceland and Japan. I think that they already have an image of me, and it should be kept that way. Not to be mean or anything, but I don't like distorting an established picture. I've done it before. With a girl named Cyprus and my friends at my secondary school. So I think that only you'll know who I truly am." His eyes sparkled with humour.

"You always struck me as gruff," I admitted. "I didn't think I'd hear something funny from you. Just sarcasm."

"Just sarcasm?" He said, of course, sarcastically, so much that I had to laugh. He smiled at my response. "I think now though, you won't think of me only that way."

"Of course not! It was kind of hard to talk to you when you had a snarky remark up your sleeve at any occasion."

"Well, you seemed like a very smart guy. Too smart for me."

"Opposites attract."

"Are you implying that I'm dumb?" He asked, though his tone was serious, he was smiling still.

"Maaaaybe," I said slowly. He shook his head and sighed.

"I'll only let you talk about me like that." He went back to gazing at the ceiling, tracing the beautiful patterns on the work of art.

"Special me,"

"You are," he clarified, looking down back at me. We finished our conversation when USSR showed up and started to dust out the room. I didn't even notice the fine layer till it was all around me and the air felt thick like paper. Russia went to open the three tiny windows in the room to let all the dust out.

"How can you all sit in a room full of dust?" USSR asked before sneezing again.

"Well, before it was just sitting," Russia pointed out. "Now it's all over the place."

"Ew, how can you breathe in all of that dust?" USSR shuddered. "Isn't that disgusting?"

"Don't you smoke, papa?" Russia asked innocently. "Isn't that almost like dust?" His father didn't respond, but continued to dust around. When he finished he immediately left and Kazakhstan bounced in and clambered up onto Russia's shoulders and sat there, content with himself.

"Hi Russia!" He waved in front of his brother's face. "Hi Ger-man-ee!"

"Hi Kazakhstan," I waved back at him and he smiled. Russia was trying to pry him off his shoulders, but Kazakhstan was stuck on him like a burr.

"I love you," Kazakhstan gurgled, and wrapped his arms around Russia's neck, so that now it was impossible to get him off. He nuzzled his face into his older brother's neck.

Russia rubbed Kazakhstan's arms affectionately. "I know you do."

"I love you too, Ger-man-ee," Kazakhstan reached one of his arms towards me. I took it and he smiled. He probably felt like I was his brother now. I thought that was cute. "You're really nice."

"Thanks Kazakhstan," I responded.

"I came to *play* with you," he continued, messing with Russia's ushanka. "Ukraine doesn't want to play with me."

"Okay," Russia took Kazakhstan off his back.

"Can you play blocks with me?" He looked at his brother with round eyes. "Please? Пожалуйста?"

"Find them first," Russia told him. Kazakhstan immediately scampered away, yelling for USSR to find him his blocks. Russia sighed. "He always wants somebody else to do the work." In a second, I heard USSR tell him to find them by himself.

"He's really sweet." I had to say.

"Yep. He is." Russia smiled. "He told me you're his third favourite person after me and father. He also asked me if you were family. I obviously said yes."

"Aw," I cooed.

"Yeah, so he was all excited," he said when Kazakhstan walked in, tugging a bag of blocks with him.

"I found them!" He exclaimed, plopping himself down and digging inside the bag. He started to build some sort of structure out of the multicoloured wooden cubes. They looked very delicately painted, and Kazakhstan handed Russia a block with his flag on it. He handed me a block with Ukraine's flag on it. "I didn't make one for you yet." He told me. "But I'll paint one with your flag soon! For

now, you can Ukraine's." The paint looked professional, and it was almost like a glaze. Ukraine's name was painted on the blue and yellow block in black cursive lettering in both English and Russian. Who spent their time to create these? USSR? He didn't look like the artistic type of person.

"What do you want us to do?" Russia threw his block into the air repeatedly catching it lightly in his hand.

"Play," Kazakhstan said simply.

"How?" The block fell from his hand.

"Help me build a castle," he started to bring the blocks into a messy pile. "One like grandpa's."

"A castle?" Russia asked. "You mean palace?"

"Yeah," Kazakhstan paid no attention to Russia's corrections. "A very big one!" The Russian family seemed to take their time and not rush, since I saw USSR and Belarus asleep on the couch in the main room. I kind of wished I had that same feeling that time would wait for me, and that I was in control. Kazakhstan finished his block palace pretty quickly and then sat in his brother's lap to admire his work.

"Very nice," Russia commented, trying to reach a radio while having Kazakhstan on his lap.

"It's bigger than my last one!" Kazakhstan said proudly.

"You're a very good builder," Russia finally reached the brown radio and turned on a station with slow country music. It was quiet, and don't travel through the other rooms. Kazakhstan toppled over the castle as soon as Russia turned the radio on.

"And now," he said as he looked down at the mess he made. "I will play with Ukraine." Stuffing all of the blocks back into the fabric bag, he left it in the room while going to search for his other brother. "Ukraine!"

"I love it when Ukraine has a reaction to Kazakhstan's pestering,"

Russia watched his brothers starter to get into a whisper argument.

"It *is* humorous," I conceded.

"We haven't done this in such a long time." Russia swept his hands around him. "Usually we're lethargic and barely do anything. But I guess you got us out of this infinite cycle."

"Hmm, interesting analogy," I smiled. He probably saw where I was going and shook his head.

"I'm not going to compare any more," he sighed.

"Too bad it's your shtick now."

"Great. But since when?"

"Since we've met." I said. "It feels like so long ago."

"Ages." He agreed. "And we've only really known each other for..." He counted on his fingers. "Four months? Not much. Feels like more than that."

"And I don't know basic stuff about you. Like what's your favourite plant?"

"Plant? Seriously? Okay, it's birch trees." He answered. "But hey, You know really deep things about me."

"Unfortunately, such as that time we don't need to mention at all. And my favourite plant is a yewberry bush."

"A bush?" He cocked his head to the side.

"Yeah. Shrubs. I've never seen much else."

"Mhm, makes sense." He said. "But I don't think that reflects on you much."

"Nor does a birch on you."

"Well, that's the whole point!" He laughed.

"Maybe..." I was cut off by a loud knock at the door.

Пожалуйста - please

It felt like I haven't updated for so long...honestly this was a hard chapter to write. It's more of a filler.

To Where We Belong

[image]

It's been a long two weeks. It felt like a long time. Now since we had two days left, the new year's past, all we had to look forward to was leaving home, back to our university. I was patiently waiting outside of the house next to father's car observing the hawks that circled above our yard, yearning to catch the chickens in their pen. The sky was high but grey, and no particular clouds could be seen. There was a furious wind, and I felt my shoulders rise to shield myself from the gale. Father was smoking again and Germany was taking his time in the bathroom. As usual. Kazakhstan was sitting on the hood of the car, playing with a string in boredom. I couldn't believe we were already leaving. It felt heart breaking to leave. Grandfather left yesterday with a regal air. He regained most of it over the last few minutes of his time with us and then left on his gold coach. I had to admit that he wasn't the type of grandfather to go out of his way for us, go fishing or bake cookies, but he cared. That's really all that matters. The wind blew the smell of smoke in my face, and covered me in the noxious fumes for a moment. I could hear behind me Kazakhstan's weak coughing from the vapours. He wasn't really used to them yet like I was.

"I'm here," Germany shut the double doors of the entrance, almost tripping down the steps.

"We'll be going shortly," I said to him, mentioning towards father, who still was watching the hawks in the air.

"It feels like we came here just yesterday."

"Mm, not really."

"Maybe to you," he nodded. "But it went by fast for me."

I shrugged in response. "I guess." Kazakhstan got off of the roof with a slide and landed on the other side of the car. Ukraine came by with headphones on and said a curt goodbye to Germany and

hugged me. Belarus did the same. We would be going two days early for travel time and to get adjusted to the time zone switch as well as the environment before studies start back up. As much as I didn't want to leave father and the rest of the family, but on the other hand, at campus I had freedom, no boundaries, and no barring, as well as the ability to follow my passion and desired profession. When I confided in my grandfather, he supported my career switch, though I secretly wondered if he was just doing it to undermine father. I don't think I have the drive or work ethic or valour to go work at a machine in a roaring factory all day long. It became too noisy, too fast and too dangerous for me. I haven't told my father about what I wanted to do yet. He would laugh at first of course, but them would go cursing in a corner.

"Ready?" Father materialised next to me, unlocking the car.

"To step into the unknown," I answered.

He smiled and got in the car. "That's what I need to hear."

"Bye Russia," Kazakhstan whispered, little tears in his eyes. He was composed for most of the day, but hugged he tightly with a protective ferocity. "You'll come back right?"

"In a half year," I promised. He nodded and wiped his tears on my shirt. He waved to Germany next.

"Bye bye Ger-man-ee." He said and then ducked behind Ukraine, unable to watch us leave. All three of them stood outside till we were beyond what the eye could see. The dirt road flashed before our eyes as father doubled his speed and the car accelerated twice the normal rate. The small patch of forest evaporated before our eyes since the pace of the car was so great. When we reached the outpost village, we veered onto a shosse and entered the open road. Father turned on the radio, and the quiet music of an accordion and guitar seeped into the silent vehicle. Germany stared at the peisage going by, the reflections shining off his glasses lens. He turned to me and mouthed an unintelligible sentence.

He tried again. "Do you think anyone else will be there? Or will we be the only ones?"

"I have no idea." I shrugged. "We're always late with stuff, I want to have a chance to experience being early."

"Mm, I'm the opposite."

"Well, lucky you then."

"*Luck* has nothing to do with it." He smiled. From the front, I heard a soft churr from my father. The phrase must've been popular or something.

"What's so funny, papa?" I asked him.

Without turning to me he answered. "It's a movie line. One of the first English movies that I watched had that phrase in it." He continued his silent laughter. We were steadily cruising at about one hundred and sixty kilometres per hour on an empty shocce for quite awhile, while the landscape grew slowly worse, with the trees soon replaced with huge smokestacks that clawed at the sky and small buildings that sprouted below like mushrooms after a rain. Trucks and automobiles raced below the highway like ants and large lorries stood waiting to be filled. Our own quiet country two lane road turned to a superhighway with six lanes each way, and crazier drivers than my father flew by without notice to the others on the road. It was this controlled chaos, as precise as an atomic clock, was what I loathed and I was fascinated by in the city. Crossing over from the oil refineries and factories to the heart of the city where the beeping of horns, sound of speaker music and yelling of the people was the centrepiece, the heartbeat of the metropolis. Germany sunk back into his seat. I knew he hated this place but what was different about his was he genuinely feared and abhorred the place. The pace of our car became slower as we entered the great wen. The traffic lights blinked and flashed all synchronized yet all different. The city's one way streets and stoplights tried to curb the amounts of vehicles on the roads, but we still managed to drive down a one way avenue and arrive to the old brick faceted train station on time. Not even early. Hurriedly, we cut through traffic jaywalking and while father disappeared to buy tickets, me and Germany were left to fend off a local beggar and to catch our breath after sprinting across the busy lane.

"Never. Jaywalking. Again." He breathed heavily.

"I do it all the time," I said. "But I never go across a huge road like that. Just small ones."

"Well, I've never done it." He gasped. "And don't ever want to do it again."

"Ready boys?" Father came to us, shoving a ticket into each of our hands.

"No." Germany replied.

"Definitely not." I mirrored Germany's answer. Father sighed and shook his head.

"Come on, you aren't little kids anymore. I'd take this kind of answer from Ukraine or Belarus." But he hugged us anyway, and for quite a while. I felt ready to leave soon after. He kissed me on the cheek and stood up to watch us leave.

"Bye papa," I waved. He watched us go and then turned to go back home.

"Our fates aren't meant be together for long," Germany sighed as we looked for our track number. I knew he was referring to father. We trekked along the concrete tunnel with staircases each way to each track. At track fourteen we ascended the steps to the raised strip of concrete where the trains stood on their rails. The warning whistle sounded and I was careful to not sit near the window, because I knew that Germany wouldn't hesitate to take it away. The train spurred into motion and we left the foul city behind. I could finally breathe easily after we passed the conglomerate conurbation and sped though the suburbs. The flat uniformly grey sky made me sleepy and my eyes threatened to close. It was a bit colder than I expected it to be, and I kept my jacket on me. Germany was looking outside the window, hypnotized by the dirty little houses and long stretches of shrubbery. The compartment we were in was mostly quiet, save for an intermittent laugh from the back and murmuring throughout the car. Germany was now entirely asleep, and he leaned his head against my left shoulder. With nothing else to do, I

reached for my bag with my foot to not disturb him and took the book I was reading before out of my bag. I was on my second chapter when I heard my phone vibrate. Who would call me? I looked at the number. +1. America.

"Hello," I picked up.

"Heeeey Russ!" He yelled from the other side. In the background, I heard French swears. "What's up?"

"Mm, nothing." I replied passively. "What's going on with you?"

"I just poured a mixture of ice, mustard and ranch sauce into my brother's bed." He said nonchalantly. "Nothing much."

"Okaay," I acknowledged. "Why did you call me?"

"Always need an answer, huh?" He laughed. "Just wanted to talk. I called most of my friends during break. I couldn't reach you or Germany during the time. You might've been off the radar."

"Yes. I was at my home. And so was Germany. There isn't very good cell service there." I explained.

"Oh, awesome," a pause. "It's great to get away from technology. I can't do that. I'm kind of addicted to my phone. Did you do anything?"

"Yes. My grandfather came."

"Your grandfather? That's cool." In only he knew how great it was. "I had my crazy uncle over for Christmas. My mom made too much food, my dad stepped on an opossum and Canada got bitten by it. So, fun."

"That's...not nice, but interesting." I tried. "I had my grandfather over. My father smashed a clock with a knife, we walked to a cottage and had a new year's quiet dinner."

"See? All families have their weird things going on." America was tackling to both me and somebody in the background. It only occurred to me then that he might be on speakerphone. "Anyways,

am I right to say Germany was with you?"

"Yes. He is technically adopted."

"Did he like it?" He asked.

"I don't know. You have to ask him." I shrugged. "Actually, he's sleeping now. We're on the train, going back."

"You're already coming back?" He said, bewildered. "But it's two more days!"

"We kind of need some adjustment time. We are going over a number of time zones. And then again, I might need time to get settled back into the university mode."

"Oh, yeah, makes sense." He agreed. "When will you be there?"

I thought for a moment. "Probably in about five hours. We're on a speed train."

"Great! I might meet you all there. Main Station, right?"

"Yes. Sounds good." I concurred. "See you soon."

"Bye," he hung up. As I moved to put my phone away, I felt Germany stir. He yawned slightly, and took off his glasses to rub his eyes.

"Good morning!" I chuckled. He shook his head and groaned.

"Not good. I don't even feel like I slept." He sat up. "What did I miss?"

"Some fields, houses and cows," I listed off. "And America called my mobile."

"What did he say?"

"He'll meet us there," I told him. "In about five hours."

He yawned again and settled back on my shoulder. "I'll try to sleep more then."

"Doesn't that hurt your neck?" I whispered to him.

"Mm, not really," he adjusted himself. "I'm kind of tired. It doesn't matter that much. Your shoulder is softer than the window pane." He fell back asleep in a matter of minutes. I noticed he could fall asleep very quickly, but would get disturbed when there was even a slight sound. My father said I could sleep through a tank invasion. Outside, little droplets of rain smacked against the thick glass windows, at first a drizzle came down and then a steady downpour. Perfect, I thought. Just as I planned to read, I wanted to sleep. But five hours, the rain and the low pressure all combined with the lull of the train, I felt myself sink into unconsciousness, to be greeted by a warm dream. I finally figured out where I belong. It's where I want to be.

Friendships

[image]

"Bye," I hung up on Russ. He was on the eastern speed train to dad's island. Super. I need to go out and socialize. Enough family time for me. Over the break, my mom thought we should all do some family stuff. She broke out a board game yesterday and I ended up picking out a chess knight out of my 'ear'. But that's not all. Dad is kind of going crazy with the tea thing, and banned me from drinking coffee or pop. Even though Russia's father looks pretty intense and strict, he probably doesn't ban his kids from drinking anything but tea and water. Also, I'm sick of crumpets. Those are disgusting.

"America," My mom sung, her signal that lunch was ready.

"Coming mom!" I yelled from my room. Leaving my phone on top of the mess of clothes and opened Saxophone case, I scrambled down the steps, three paces ahead of Canada. Our kitchen was filled with little knicknacks on the top of all the cabinets and our wallpaper was navy blue. Two tiny windows covered over with too many blinds shed absolutely no light into the kitchen, so we installed LED lights everywhere. Mom liked the 'I can't see what I'm eating' feel and would turn off the lights at night to light candles. She was wearing her frilly pink apron and served me a warm reheated Shepherd's Pie from yesterday on a plate with patient on flowers. Yay for leftovers. Canada sat opposite of me and mom joined us soon afterward.

"Who did you call?" Mom asked me.

"Russia. My friend from school." I explained. "He's coming in about five hours."

"Oh, that's nice," mom turned to dad, who was coming in. "I have him in my class. Hello, Amour."

"Hello sweetie," dad crossed over to peek into the window. "Those stupid squirrels are eating my bird feed. Again." I rolled my eyes. Dad got into his 'middle age man bird watching' phase. Most of the afternoons he would spend watching the birds through the window. He even keeps a logbook. Canada was sneaking a portion of his pie back into the plate while everyone was distracted. It was pretty quiet now since Australia and New Zealand had school already and didn't bounce around the house. Their winter break started way earlier than mine. Canada was a full grown man, capable of living independently, but he chose to live with us. He is a year away from getting a master's degree, and already has a job at a forestry company. Dad was proud that Canada skipped over two years worth of study and could get his master's only after half the regular time it took. He had fourth year undergraduate friends, and I frequently saw him with a fidgety guy named Poland and an ambitious girl called Israel. He has a bunch more, but I forget their names.

"America was talking about his friend, Russia." Mom said serenely. "He called him just now."

Dad tried to cover his sudden surprise. "Russia? Is that Soviet Union's little boy?" I think dad's behind the times. Russia could hardly be called little, much less a little boy. He could probably beat Canada in a straight brawl, and had the same disapproving look on his face most of the time.

"Oui," mom nodded. "I was wondering if he would like to come here? To get to know us?" All my mind could say was no, no, no. Both Russia and Germany would take one look at this place and my status would just degrade in their eyes. Time to use those savvy talking skills.

"Oh, mom." I interrupted her chatter. "Russia is travelling with another guy named Germany."

"Germany?" My mom positively beamed. "I know him as well. He's a very troubled student, but is very smart. That's great." I groaned on the inside. Not that I didn't want them here. I just didn't need them

to see what we do on a daily basis being together for more than an hour. "We can definitely have them over."

"Jolly good," dad delivered the verdict of disaster. "America, go an call Russia and say that they're invited if they want to come. After that, I would like you to clean the mess out of your room. It's sickening." With no choice, I trudged up the steps, deliberately making it loud, and plopped on my bed, searching for my phone. Dialling up Russ' number and waited.

"Hello?" Came his voice. It sounded groggy. He must've been asleep.

"Hey Russ, it's me."

"You sound sad. Why so?" Even with the weird English vocabulary he possessed, he still pinpointed everything. I wondered how he would know these super old and convoluted words, yet not find a synonym for 'sad'.

"Ah, nothing. My dad invites you and Germany to come to our house,"

"Us?" I heard Germany's voice.

"I'm on speakerphone," Russ explained.

"Got it." I said.

"But we can come. That's fine." He continued. "If it won't be a bother."

"My dad insists," I drawled.

"We'll come," Germany giggled in the background. "You can tell him that we'll be happy to."

"Okay, see you at the station," I acknowledged that they would be coming. "I need to clean my mess."

"Bye!" They both said and hung up. I looked around my room. My Saxophone stood near my beige closet door which was overflowing with clothes. Actually, my clothes were everywhere. On the floor,

my bed (nobody can see the colour of my bed quilt) my desk and literally in every other nook and cranny there is. I guess that's where I start. I opened the Venetian blinds from my window and unlatched the lock to let air come into the room. Picking up my clothes was both gross and rewarding. I finally found my purple track team shirt. I got the shirt, but never ran the races. I wasn't going to lie on the ground, groping for water and wheezing. No thanks. I don't need to add asthma to my bad health list.

"Whacha doing, America?" Canada leaned against my doorframe.

"Cleaning."

"Happy Cleaning," he waved. "I'm meeting my friends down by the park. If New Zealand asks, tell him I'm hanging out, *not* smoking drugs." He said sternly. Last time I fibbed to New Zealand, and told him that his oldest brother was a drug addict. The shock on his face was priceless.

"Okay," I winked. "Have fun. Or whatever."

"Or whatever," he sighed. "Bye." He left me with my mound of clothes. Half of them I sent to the wash downstairs, much to my dad's disapproval and the other had to be folded. Yuck. Folding. After I did that, my room looked much better, and bigger too. I had to clear off the chips bags and gum wrappers off of my desk and swept them into my already full garbage receptacle. Oh, well. I looked around my purple walled room. I stuck a large poster next to my bed in the far corner and soon many other posters joined it. Sitting down on my cold wood floor, I looked for other miscellaneous trash in weird places and then huffed, stood up and admired my work. I mean, it wasn't the best, and I had to make my bed still, but all in all, pretty good. The smell of a foreign food wafted into the upstairs. Mom must be trying to make Russian or German food to impress our guests. By what they eat in the cafeteria, I have a feeling that both of them aren't really picky with food. I came down our steps that led directly into the living room. The only big panoramic window we had was in the main room. It was large and faced our huge and useless lawn, or what my dad calls the moor. We stopped mowing it on account of the gas bill. I took a quick look at my phone. Almost time.

"Mom!" I called across the room.

"Oui?" She answered as I came into the smoke filled room. She was bent over a large pot into which she was carefully putting in a rack of lamb. The greens in her little pan were burnt, and the smoke was intoxicating.

"The smoke alarm might come on," I warned. Soon enough, the annoying beeping came on. Dad materialised next to it and waved a towel below it to clear the smoke. Mom closed the door and the whine of the alarm stopped. "I'm going to go pick up Germany and Russia now."

"Okay. I will call when dinner will be ready." She kissed me lightly on my forehead and waved goodbye before tuning to her book. A disgusting looking egg and beat salad covered in mayonnaise stood on the table. Nope. Not eating that. I took my coat from the closet near the door and left. Last year, my dad bought himself a new car. For my eighteenth birthday, I got his old car. I immediately traded in the vintage Rolls Royce for a cooler looking black Caddie. No way was I going to drive in an old man car. I rolled out of the driveway and rode along our quiet country lane. My friends always ask me where I really live. I tell them the city, and show them my studio apartment at the centre of town. I'd never tell them I live on a huge estate with only two trees for the whole yard. I turned on the radio with some country music and picked up the speed along the highway. What a time to be alive!

"What a time," I said to myself. I almost missed my exit and had to cross two lanes of traffic to get over to the freeway. Barreling down the freeway, I went off of another exit and recognised the city. On the far side was where the university was and in the middle was the station. After passing a few red lights I managed to parallel park without scratching up my fender, and took out my phone to dial Russ again.

"*Yees*?" Came the answer. He sounded strained.

"I'm here," I announced.

"Where?"

"In the front."

"Where?" He asked in the same dry tone.

"Not on the platform."

"I thought you said you'll greet us."

"In the car."

"Great." Russian sarcasm seeped into his every word. "Where's your car?"

"I parked near the entrance, on the left." I had to check my right from my left. Yep, left. "I'm in a black Cadillac. You'll see me."

"Okay. Bye." I wasn't the type to go up to the track and meet people. I liked when I sat in the car and people came to me. Much easier if you were to ask me. Five minutes later, I saw Russ with his ever present grey earflap hat look around with Germany in tow. Was it my imagination, or was Germany holding Russ' hand? I honked my horn to get their attention and hopped out to greet them.

"Nice Cad-O-*Lac*." Russ said in a not very Russian way. He almost had an American accent that time. I could definitely see that they were holding hands. Strange.

"Hi America," Germany waved and acted as if I wasn't gaping at his hand. I hugged them, and asked how we're things.

"Things are fine." Russ answered. "Feelings are fine too." He smirked at his own inside joke.

"We had a nice time," Germany clarified. "How about you?"

"I'm good, I'm swell." I said as we sat into the car. I made Russ sit in the front with me, and Germany climbed into the back. I turned on the folk song station, where they currently broadcasted a lively polka. "We're going to my house. Warning to you: you'll have to eat what my mom cooked."

"I'll eat anything," Russ shrugged. "I'm kind of hungry. We skipped

lunch, and breakfast was plain overnight oats from the communal cold pot."

"Ew." I shuddered.

"It wasn't that bad," Germany sighed. "Russia is just making it out to be horrible."

"I am not." He raised his eyebrows. "I never said they were bad. Just cold."

"Hey, for a guy who doesn't eat cold food per say, I have to admit, that's gross." I admitted. They both laughed. "An other yummy novelties?"

"Холодец," Russ said in his soft consonant Russian. "Its like jelly, but made from chicken foot collagen."

"Now that is disgusting. No offense." I shook my head. "Holodez? That's how you say it?"

"You know, it was actually pretty good." Germany reassured me. "I tried it for the first time there. At first, Russia's description made it seem horrible, but it's actually tasty."

"How so? It's cold. It's made with unprocessed food." I counted off. "Already from my list of food to have to try."

"Whatever." Russ sighed. "Your choice." Germany smiled at him warmly.

"It's always been a choice for me." I nodded, taking my sunglasses off and handing them to Russ. "Speaking of choice, what up with you two?" Oops. Kind of didn't want it to come out that way.

"What?" Germany cocked his head.

"Will you not tell?" Russ asked, almost with a threatening tone.

"Cross my heart and star spangled banner." I promised.

"Okay..."

"We kind of like each other," Germany finished for Russ. Hmm, unexpected. He didn't specify the intensity of liking. Maybe they were more than friends, but less than lovers. Totally fine with me.

"You better not tell anyone." Russ growled.

"Of course!" I looked at him for a quick second. "I promised."

"Good."

"What you have to promise me is to not tell anyone what kind of a house I have." I chuckled.

"Hah, we'll see." He smirked.

As I've said before, I'm mixing things up a bit so its a little more entertaining for everyone. It was fun to write America's sassy, informal and sometimes rude, funny and blunt thoughts. Hope you enjoyed!

(The picture is from the United States Embassy in Latvia webpage.)

The Moor and the Estate of Tea

[image]

"So what have you been doing the past two weeks?" Russia fiddled with his jacket zipper while talking with America. I have to admit, he had a nice car. The low cruiser sedan had tan leather seats and an upgraded heat system. I guess he knew what he was doing when he browsed for cars. America was wearing his signature sunglasses, even in the cloudy weather, and a black leather jacket this time. His mother called in the middle of the drive, and America passed the phone to Russia so as to talk to her.

"She says 'dinner is ready', whatever that means." He announced.

"Russ, you don't know what that means?" America raised his eyebrows. "It means food is on the table, and we're late."

"I thought it was a code message or something," Russia sighed. "But you didn't answer my first question."

"So I'll answer now. I've been avoiding family time," he explained as we turned onto a quiet lane. "As you may have found, I like to socialize with friends. I don't like playing chess with my sore loser brother." Most of the houses were separated by large stretches of gated gardens or lawns, and America expertly turned onto a long paved driveway with a large black steel and wood gate. As we drew nearer, I craned my neck to look at the house. It looked kind of like an average ordinary ranch house with two floors. "We're here!" He sung a trill note.

"Yay." Russia got out of the car. I came out as well, and a gust of wind greeted me, sending my glasses askew. Next to us, a large four by four tan truck rolled in, and a heavy set man came out. He was dressed in a red plaid shirt and black jeans which contrasted sharply with his white skin. Even though his hands looked like they could easily wring my neck, his hazel eyes were friendly.

"Hey," he waved to me. All I could do was stare, dumbfounded. I

guess I looked disturbed, because he didn't say anything else and went over to America, who was busy locking his car. "Hey America, I'm back."

"Hi Canada," the other the grunted, trying to get his key out of the lock. "Did you have a fun time smoking?"

Canada looked harassed. "For the last time, I don't do drugs! Mind introducing me to these people?" He pointed to Russia, who was standing a bit away with a disapproving look on his face.

"This," America came over to me. "Is Germany. He's the nerdy guy. And this," he strolled over to Russia. "Is no nonsense English learner Russia. They're both in first year at my school."

"I still don't know why dad runs this school." Canada sighed. "And why you're in it."

"Because I'm younger. And luckier than you." America slowly danced over to the door with the grace of a chicken that saw corn.

"Whatever," Canada followed his brother. America led us into the house, and we found ourselves in a large living room with pale beige walls and framed bird sketches along one. A couch stood in front of a huge panoramic window, and another was adjacent. A low coffee table stood between them.

"Hi mom! We're here," America announced our presence. France appeared in a white blouse with a frilly neck and a black pencil skirt. Even though she looked very sophisticated, her face suggested that she was working the whole time. Mr. UK came in his ever present grey suit and top hat and shook both my and Russia's hand.

"I am pleased to have you at our home," Mr. UK looked even shorter compared to Russia and was easily the second shortest person in the room. I was obviously the most vertically challenged in the room.

"Thank you." Russia spoke first. "For inviting us." I nodded in agreement, but said nothing. It would be really morbid to say the exact same thing.

"Come in, come in, you can sit here," France led us to the two

couches and produced a bottle of sparkling juice from nowhere. She poured us and her husband glasses, but didn't offer her sons any. Canada snuck upstairs and into his room and America sat awkwardly next to his mother, while Mr. UK positioned himself in a rocking chair opposite of us.

"So boys, how was your break?" Came the generic question from Mr. UK's mouth.

"It was fine." Russia mumbled. "We stayed at our family home."

"Oh, very nice." France smiled. "America told us that you would be returning here two days early. I thought maybe you would like to come over."

"That's very thoughtful of...you." I felt so uncomfortable talking to France in the singular second person form. Why didn't English have a formal second person form...

"Do you enjoy the school?" Mr. UK asked.

"Yes, it's been my dream to be accepted," I started. "And so far, I very much like it. It is as educational and resourceful as I had imagined." I was careful in leaving out how Czechia threw me dark looks and how Croatia fainted in Andorra's Philosophy class. *That* was unnecessary information. Mr. UK nodded at my words.

"How about you, Russia?" He turned his gaze to him.

"Eh, honestly, I did not think I'd make it. I thought I would try to, but it wasn't a serious intention. Until I got in, of course." Russia said, a bit nervously. "Now, I'm starting to look over options and maybe looking into switching career paths."

Mr. UK was mildly surprised. "Oh, and what would that be?"

"It's not a large rift from my original plan. At first, I thought I'd get my four year in mechanical engineering and go to work in my father's factory. Now, I'm thinking of moving to maybe a Master's degree in naval engineering." Russia stated.

"Interesting." He nodded. "And you, Germany?"

"Um, I'm looking into the economics field actually." I said. "At first I was interested in chemistry, but it became very confusing, very fast. Even though it's important, I still would rather pursue a career in the business field."

"I understand." He told me to my surprise. "I, myself, wanted to become a professor of classical history. I ended up becoming an executive accountant. A banker. So I must say, our stories don't look too different."

"Mhmm." Was all I could say.

"I never figure out what I wanted to do." France cut in, poring herself yet another glass. "At first, I loved theatre, and I majored in it. Then, fashion design and then visual arts. I even sculpted in the recent years. So, I've been drifting in and out. Oh, and I love to cook." She smiled. "Speaking of which, I prepared a dinner that I have to say, is foreign to me. You must tell me how I did." She stood up and led us into the kitchen. She must've worked her heart out on the dinner. A large seared rack of lamb with an array of boiled potatoes and carrots was the centrepiece of the table. A number of small salads were arranged along the table. I recognised vinigrette, a beet, pea and mayonnaise Russian salad, along with a neat carrot and cabbage sauerkraut. Next to me, Russia was obviously and openly staring at the food. No matter how good times were, he was always amazed when a particularly large amount of food was concentrated on one table. War children. France called for Canada and he came down shortly, in a regular light blue long sleeve shirt and khaki pants.

"Bon appetit," Mr. UK motioned us to the table. Russia murmured a hasty prayer, and soon we were all eating. For all the talk about first tries, France made accurate recipes. "Australia and New Zealand, our younger children are at an overnight camping trip. That's why there is an absence of usual chatter."

"I have a little brother too." Russia smiled. "His name is Kazakhstan. He's very sweet and chatty as well."

"It's actually better without them," America said, even though his father pursed his lips tightly. "They would ask awkward questions."

Nobody spoke after his comment. Actually, nobody spoke until Mr. UK asked Canada and America to clear the table and set up tea. I could see clearly that America rolled his eyes when his father said 'tea'. Before there could be a conflict between father and son, Canada swiftly grabbed his brother by the scruff and gently hauled him away to prepare for the second half of dinner. The plates were replaced by pink napkins and the dishes with tea and little griddle cakes.

"Do you like these?" America whispered to me, out of earshot of his father.

"Um, they're alright." I said.

He made a face. "I hate these things." Tea was a quiet affair, and only France would intermittently murmur to her husband, while the rest of us either looked around or into our cups. Russia was busy swirling his spoon in his cup and America was still disdainfully looking at the crumpets. The only person who didn't find the ritual uncomfortable was Mr. UK. I wished for somebody to talk to break the thick silence. Finally, France heeded my soundless inclination.

"Germany, do you take any art courses?" She asked.

"I was thinking about it." I didn't look her way. "But I don't know what to do yet."

"Well, I could suggest drama," she advertised. "Not to push you in a direction, but Russia takes it with me. And we just started." Russia nodded in response, but didn't look enthusiastic about joining in the conversation. "We have about six students in the class. And we connect with the Theatre Club, which this year has about fifteen students in it. We'll be doing Queen of Spades as our production. Very exciting."

"I'll think about it." I promised. I personally had a little stage fright, and I didn't want to speak or act or dance or sing on stage in any situation. America looked like he was itching to leave the table and soon Mr. UK dismissed his son, who had to drag me and Russia up the sandy coloured carpeted steps. He turned to the left into the first room, which turned out to be his own.

"Welcome!" He announced, shutting the small window. Compared to the large balcony in USSR's home, America's room had a laughable porthole type opening that shed little light into the room. His walls were light purple and a picture frame of him with his brothers hung in one wall and on the other was plastered with posters of different bands and a college banner. His bed was pretty small and had two accent pillows perched on the edge. The amount of free room that he had wasn't much, and it already felt cramped when all three of us were in it. America went to sit on his bed and Russia on the floor, with one leg under him.

"Very...nice," Russia struggled to find a word.

"Not the best," America admitted. "But I grew up here. So it has my personality. There was a mound of clothes right there," he pointed to where Russia was sitting.

"At least you cleaned." Russia said.

"Half of the stuff was dirty. So it was pretty easy." He shrugged in response, sliding his sunglasses back on his face.

"Your rooms are very dark," I pointed out.

"We only have one big window," America made a downward motion with his hand. "And it's in the living room."

"We have large windows everywhere. My father likes when it's light. It makes everyone happier." Russia stated. "Except for our living room, all other rooms have big windows. I mean, a room without a window is like a fence without birds."

America was trying not to laugh. "Russ, that was the worst comparison ever."

Russia shook his head. "Well a fence doesn't have to have birds, just like a room doesn't have to have a window. But it looks better with a window, just like a fence looks prettier with birds on it."

"Okay, okay. That was an okay comparison." America conceded after Russia's lengthy explanation. Unconsciously, I slid over to Russia, who put his arm around my shoulders. America turned

away in silent laughter.

"What is so funny?" He said.

"Oh, nothing," America tried to squash down his involuntary smile. "It's just...never mind."

"Good." Russia said with such seriousness that he doubled over in giggles. Russia made a harassed face at that.

"Oh boy, you all are so funny. And cute. Together."

"I am not *cute*." Russia tilted his chin up.

"Russ, I would never ever *ever*, for my own safety call you cute." America raised his hands in defence. "I said you both look nice together. Which is a compliment."

"Fine." Russia said flatly, hugging me tighter. I would've enjoyed it if America didn't gawk so much. I couldn't express my own joy and remained rigid and emotionless. "Your mother cooks well." Russia tried to switch topic.

"I know you just want to change the subject." America smiled.

"As a matter of fact, yes." Russia fought honesty with honesty. "It's awkward seeing you staring at us."

"What am I supposed to do?" He asked. "Not look? You guys are literally the highlight of my whole break! I almost went crazy when my mom tried to get us to play card games with my dad."

"Alright," Russia sighed. "You're just the first one that we've told that's not each other."

America acknowledged that with a nod. "I know. Must've been hard to hide, right?"

"We weren't even trying." I admitted.

He huffed and crossed his arms. "That's not even fair. My dad always has to stick his nose in my business. Especially when it

comes to relationships. He scared off my last girlfriend with his tea craze." Funny how we still use the phrase even when we don't have noses. How uncanny.

"You know Japan likes you." Russia said. "And she doesn't even hide it."

"I know. And she is pretty and funny. Maybe it sounds stupid competing from me, but I can't just go up to her and say that I'd be willing to hang out."

"Doesn't sound like you,"

"Yeah, it doesn't. You know what? How about it try, and you'll be my witnesses."

"Sure, what's the deadline?" Russia asked.

"End of February."

"So long?"

"It took you guys like four months."

"Hey, I didn't even think I liked Germany till winter break. So it took two weeks."

"Awesome." America slid off his bed. "When is the kissing part happening?"

Russia retained his cool exterior. "Not as yet. I can't jump into situations like you. I need to take things in stride."

America nodded slowly. "I understand. Just tell me when."

"Really America?" We both said in unison, which made him laugh even harder.

Faces and Books

[image]

We were back in America's car. After the dinner, we chatted a bit with America about trivial matters such as professors we didn't like, and soon enough it was darkening and he offered to drive us back to campus. We agreed and he told his parents that he'd come with us. Waiting for him to collect his stuff was horrible, since the chill bit through my clothes, but at least I fared better than Germany. He was lightly running around the car, which reminded me of a funny thing my father used to do. He noticed me quietly laughing at him.

"What....is....Oof....so funny..." He gasped while running.

"You know, my father used to run like that in the cold when he drank. As his own punishment." I laughed. "He would run and keep repeating: надо меньше пить, надо меньше пить. And exactly like that."

Germany suppressed a grin with effort. "But I'm cold!"

"Wear warm clothes," I suggested, wrapping my scarf around my neck tighter. He came up and tugged my jacket off, wrapping it around himself. "Hey!" I protested. Underneath, I had next to nothing, a light long sleeve.

"I'm cold," he mumbled again. "And you seem okay anyway." The wind decided to pick up, spraying a light flurry of snow on me.

"Germany!" I yelled in frustration. He wrapped the jacket around

himself tighter, but pressed against my side.

"I'm keeping you warm this way." He smiled under the hood.

"*Excuse me,* but I'm feeling no warmth whatsoever."

He hugged my waist. "How about now?"

"No. Germany, please can I have my jacket back?" I pleaded.

"America's here," he pointed out. The door creaked and America came out, hauling a large box of stuff with him. He smirked at both of us and I huffed angrily.

"Ready?" He unlocked his car and went in.

"Can you turn the heat up?" I asked, climbing into the car. "I'm freezing."

"Aren't you Russian?" America said in an annoying tone. "Don't you like the cold?"

"I don't. Just because I'm Russian, doesn't mean I have to like cold." I argued. "And liking and withstanding are two different things."

"Okay, okay Mr. Professor." America smiled. "Have you thought of a career in teaching?"

"No. But I have switched my major."

"To what?" He said, a little interested. He was turning though a bunch of radio stations, not waiting more than five seconds before switching them.

"Seriously? It seems radical to me, but you'll scoff."

"Naw, I won't...please?" He begged. "I'll turn the heat up."

"What an offer." I said dryly. "I'm thinking of nautical or naval engineering instead of pure mechanical." I heard his sigh soon after.

"Oh Russ," he shook his head. "Really? But whatever, I guess. Good for you."

"Will the heat come on now?" I asked. "Somebody stole my coat." Germany involuntarily giggled.

He nodded and turned the knob."Yes, yes," Soon, I could feel my fingers. Yay. Everything was fine till the point where America decided to turn on an American pop radio station and sing to it.

One hour later, after being stuck in traffic, America finished singing. "Do you guys want another one?"

"*NO*." I said immediately. He laughed at my response.

"I'd rather not." Germany announced diplomatically. We were almost at the campus, and the ride took twice as long because of the evening traffic, which meant even more bad singing from America.

"Aw, come on guys!" He pretended to be hurt. "Be considerate. I want to be a singer."

I sucked my teeth. "Please,"

"Joking." He laughed. "You're way too serious Russ. One might say, aloof."

"I'm sorry. I don't know English as well as I thought." I looked out the window. The night dominated the skies now and painted the heavens black. Nightlife blossomed and flashy bars and casinos opened up to outshimmer each other, attracting customers. The campus stood apart from the glimmering city, along with the ancient statues and old parks and unlike the blinding colourful lights at the city centre, the campus shone with the light from one thousand old lanterns on posts. America parked neatly near the curb of the entrance. I had to admit, he drove very smoothly and calmly, unlike father, who would accelerate and push on the brakes in a matter of seconds. Let's not mention parking.

"Ta da! Welcome back to campus." He sang, turning off the car, which meant, the heat. I tugged the jacket off unsuspecting Germany and zipped it up before he could do anything.

"No more singing." I said rather gruffly. I felt jetlag coming in, and even though it was still about half to eight, I already felt my knees slightly buckling.

"But singing is so fuuuuuuuun!" He trilled.

"No." I shook my head stubbornly. I meant to say something else, but I was stuck on a word and kept silent. I only figured it out once it was too late. I figured my English became worse since the time I left.

"Fine," he said a little flatly, but regained his bouncy pace as we came into the campus. Without many people in it, the arrays of buildings looked like deserted well preserved gothic ruins. The mythical creatures stood still with their wicked and surprised expressions, and I though about how much time it would take to carve these out individually by hand. All those spires up on the top with granite faces and stony feeling etched into them, and nobody ever looked up to admire and just stare at them. I must've looked weird having my head tipped up because Germany immediately had to get my attention.

"What are you looking at?"

"The faces on the spires," I pointed up. His light amber eyes followed my finger to the top, but his expression was unreadable, but his stare was passive although searching.

"I've never noticed those before," he said softly. "They look...a little scary. Why would you have such angry and sorrowful looks etched into your walls forever."

"Oh, those are alumni," America cut in. "Those were their facial expressions when they first saw this place." Count on America to lighten things up. Germany made a face and looked at the spires no more.

"Seriously America?" I sighed. "Always have something to say."

"No kidding," he smiled. "But it's a school myth." He twirled his keys around his fingers until they fell onto the pavement with a clink.

After two more rounds of that, he suddenly looked around, alert. "Oh, I missed my crossroad. Sorry guys, I go the other way. Anyway, sorry to leave you all early, but I have to go."

"That's okay," Germany nodded. "Thanks for letting us have dinner at your house."

"Yes, thank you." I parroted. He hugged us both and then left the way we came. Finally, we're alone. I could tell that Germany didn't like crowds either and was perfectly comfortable with only me as company. It was nice being preferred over somebody else. That rarely ever happened in my life. He nestled his little cold hand in mine and we walked very peacefully down the winding concrete path, the only whiteness being the winged beasts sitting on top of all the ledges, staring as we passed by. Our nice walk was ruined once again by my phone ring "Hmm, who's this?"

"Maybe your dad?" Germany suggested. I picked up.

"Hello?" I greeted.

"Good evening Russia." Came the serene voice of Dr. Austria. Oh, him again. I didn't expect him to call. "I hope you are doing well, yes?" Germany cocked his head and mouthed: "who's that?" at me.

"Yes, I am." I mouthed to Germany that it was his uncle. He seemed to understand.

"May I ask you to come by after tomorrow? I have something to show you." He said.

"I'm at campus right now." I mentally slapped myself for saying that. I kind of was falling over my feet.

"Oh, good! Maybe you could come by...right now?" He asked. "If it's not a problem." He added hurriedly. "I understand it might be too late..."

"No sir, it's fine. I can come." I faked a cheery voice.

That seemed to do the trick. "Good. It's nothing important really. Just mildly interesting."

"Should I come to your office?"

"Yes. I will wait for you there." He said. "Just knock on the door."

"Okay. Thank you." I didn't wait for a reply and hung up. Then I groaned loudly. By the looks of it, Germany probably heard the conversation, because he pressed himself into my side and rubbed my arm sympathetically.

"I can come with you." He offered. "Uncle knows who I am. So it won't be a problem." I nodded in response, and instead of turning right to our dormitories, we turned the other direction, to Dr. Austria's office. His light was on and in the distance I could see the bright lights of his bureau. We neared the contemporary single level small building and I knocked on the door. After a few seconds and a 'coming!' later, he appeared in a brown tweed jacket and white pants, dress only for fussy old rich people who play golf and shuffle papers.

"Hello Russia, sorry for calling at the late hour." He didn't notice Germany yet. "So nice to see you." He noticed. "Oh, and Germany too. Welcome back."

"Hello Uncle," Germany waved and slipped his hand a little too noticeably out of my grip. "I stayed with Russia during the break and....I thought maybe I could come as well....I won't bother anyone...." He kept on mumbling some sort of excuse, but I got the feeling that Dr. Austria understood. He led us in and quickly told his assistant something in German. I'm glad I could understand it all. He asked the young subordinate, who I found was his son to talk to Germany while he conversed with me. His son rolled his eyes and sighed loudly, keen on showing his disappointment towards his German speaking fellow. Dr. Austria put an arm around my shoulders, with some effort, and steered me gently towards his pink walled office. On the low coffee table was an expensive Italian watch catalogue along with a low brim cup with strong smelling tea. He sat down opposite of me on the couch and took out a black folder, rummaging through it.

"I found this in my attic. I do not know how it became there, but I have it, and I would like to Gove it to you." He produced a slim

little paperback book. I instantly recognized the cyrillic characters on the front and felt drawn to read it. I could see that he wanted to know what was written inside, but couldn't translate the whole book word by word. I took the book out of his light grip and flipped though to the first page. Strange. The words were all handwritten and it took me exactly five seconds to recognize the script of my father. Each chapter was signed off, each time differently. Dr. Austria looked at me expectantly, as if I would translate the words in the book.

"Thank you. I will read through it later...if you would not mind." I saw a small flash of disappointment in his eyes, but then he nodded and smiled.

"I understand that. Absolutely fine with me." He suppressed a yawn. "Pardon. It's getting late."

"I'll be going now...I guess." I stood up and left the room, his eyes trained on me until I closed the door. Germany and Dr. Austria's son were waiting for me to finish.

"Everything alright?" Germany asked. "Switzerland told me it was something important." He looked desperate to leave.

"Done?" Switzerland said dryly. "I'm falling on my feet. And I had to come." He kept on grumbling. His dress was expensive, and he wore a crisp starch white dress shirt under a tan vest. What my father called a real spoiled child. He wasn't even eighteen yet. It was the same boy we met in that cafe with America about a month ago.

"We'll be going now," Germany took my hand and led me out of the office. Switzerland did not have a chance to reply when Germany closed the door. "I can't stand talking to him." Germany shook his head.

"Why not?"

"All he can talk about is what he has. And then asks me what I have. What can I say?" He sighed. "He's a little annoying and materialistic. Well, why am I surprised? Everyone is." He looked up at me. "Especially people who say they aren't. And I look around at

other people, wishing I was that wealthy. Don't you? Don't you also think that sometimes all your problems can be fixed with money?"

"Sometimes. Not always though." I said, stopping. "I think that I can get creative when it come to that."

"Hmm, I thought you said that you need a degree and then that's it." He had doubt in his eyes.

I took both of his hands. "Listen. I can change as well, and I think I can't even recognize myself anymore. I've learned and grown so much. I realized that I can't always do things by myself. I realized that I don't have to push myself to do everything excellent. I realized that...I'm not immune to emotion either. No matter how much I try." He smiled as I finished and hugged me tightly. I did the same, and we stayed like that, in the moon washed courtyard with nobody except us. I felt that he started to sob into my jacket. "Germany...please don't cry." I whispered. But when he turned his head to me, his tear stained face was smiling.

"You don't know how I needed to hear that." He hugged me even tighter. "Thank you."

"Of course."

"I love you, Russia." He said.

I looked down at him and smiled. "I love you, Germany."

Надо меньше пить - I need to drink less

Happy Women's Day!

I've realised in myself that I do not write on weekends, but plenty on weekdays.

Acceptance

[image]

I felt like my feet would give in at some point during our trip back to the dormitories. I walked, or in this case leaned on Russia, as we made our way down the spiralling walkways. The lanterns have started to dim, meaning that it was almost nine at night. Jetlag finally caught up to me, and didn't come very nicely.

"Germany," Russia whispered.

"What?" I groaned.

"You're going to have to walk to your dormitory by yourself." He smiled.

"No...." I shifted more weight on him. I heard him sigh and shake his head.

"We're in different colleges, remember?" He pet my head. "This is where the crossroad is." I slowly stood up and took my bag from his hand.

"Alright, bye then." I waved.

"Have a good night." He said and left. I didn't turn to my road till he disappeared around the corner. Now getting back to my own dorm...that's going to be a bit of a problem. I had problems as soon as my card key didn't work when I slid it into the gate slot. After three tries, I was able to get up the stairs and to my floor. Going to bed was a little hard. I had to fiddle with my key for about a minute and then my door wouldn't open until I rammed my shoulder into

it. The room felt cold and not very welcoming, but I couldn't care less at the moment. Putting my things in a random corner, I went into the bathroom, hissing at the bright lights. I almost drowned in the sink while washing my face and without further thought, I lapsed into unconsciousness as soon as I touched the pillow.

I awoke at five thirty next morning, fresh and ready for the day. Usually I slept late and worked late, but today I felt all the tendrils of sleep leave me. I didn't close the windows last night and I could see the rare blue sky shining outside. Behind the balcony glass, birds twittered, people talked and cars honked. Today was the last day of the break and most of the students would be coming back. I made my way to the balcony and looked out on the campus. Some professors were already there, and I recognised some faces below. The air was still biting and cold, but the sun warmed the earth up so much that it felt comfortable. I rummaged around the kitchenette to find a low sugar oatmeal packet with dried blueberries. The oatmeal was old and there was no sugar or blueberries in it. I ate the mealy breakfast without much gusto, but it wasn't going to be a deterrence. I left the dish in the sink and walked out of my dorm room with a light jacket on, and down the steps, only realising what I was doing when my hands were on the slim bars of our college gate. Where was I going? At the same moment, America passed by, carrying a coffee with him.

"Hi America," I said. He turned around in surprise and smiled.

"Hey! What's going on?" He came over. "You're up early."

"Jetlag," I explained curtly.

He nodded in understanding. "I see. Where's Russ? Oh, he's in a different college, right?"

"Yes."

"Is he in....Willow? No....Redwood? Ah, I forgot."

"Pine. He's in Pine College."

"Oh, cool. Are you going that way? Maybe I should come too."

"I actually haven't thought of where I was going...till now." I admitted sheepishly, pushing against the bars to open the gates. The weather was warm enough for me to be comfortable in my wind breaker jacket. We walked down to Pine College in silence, not counting America's singing to his music from his earphones. When we got to the gate, he facepalmed.

"We can't get in, we don't have a key card." He paced around in a circle for a bit. "Do you have your phone?" I shook my head. "Rule number one, always have your phone. Rule number two, know that addict America always has his phone." He smiled and dialed up Russia's mobile number and placed it on speaker.

"Hello?" Came the rough and static voice.

"Hi Russ! It's America and Germany!" He exclaimed. "We're at your college gates."

"What are you doing there?" He asked, clearly annoyed.

"Just came here to find out what you're doing...we're regular old bored undergraduate students. What else should we do?"

A sigh came from the receiver. "You know your call woke me up, right? I'm in bed."

"Awesome. Well maybe you can get up and come down? I have food if you want." America said with a smile. "How's that?"

A pause and a shuffling greeted his words. "Mmm, fine." He grumbled. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Yay! See you in a few." America hung up and gave me a thumbs up. "Got him." We waited for Russia for a couple of minutes till he appeared, half asleep.

"Hi," he said.

"Good morning," America shoved a muffin in his hand. "How's life?"

"We just saw each other yesterday." Russia mumbled. It seemed that he didn't pay attention to what he wore when he came out. He was wearing black sweatpants and a dark grey t shirt in the beginning of January. Yet he seemed more annoyed and sleepy than shivering from the gusts of wind.

"Last day guys, what do you want to do?"

"Um, first of all, you make it sound like we only have twenty four more hours to live," Russia said matter of fact. "Secondly, we don't. So don't rush. Only I can do that."

"Of course, of course, I have forgotten," America faked a a high and sharp British accent. "We shall all do what Professor Russia would like."

"Seriously?" Russia finished his muffin in record time of ten seconds. "Stop calling me that."

"Neveeeeeer!" America laughed. Russia decided to take the lead and walked up towards the north side. Seeing that both of us had no choice, we followed suit, but America preferring to cut across Russia's path a few times in a row, till the latter pushed him lightly into the hedgerows. "Where are we going, Russ?"

"Where I want, since you woke me up." Said Russia defiantly.

"Oh well, sorry. Germany was going to get you anyway." Russia eyed me with a surprised expression and I shrugged. On the way America suddenly ducked behind a tree, out of the blue. Russia looked at him as if he was insane, and I just could stop in my tracks.

"What's wrong?" I asked. America made a *shhing* motion.

"Hush. Don't let *him* see me." He hissed, pressing himself as tight to the tree as possible. Rounding a corner, a short and relatively medium height man came from the opposite direction of us. By their clothing, I could tell that they were from the Far East. Both men seemed to recognise Russia, because the shorter one started to talk to him in a foreign language.

"你好 俄罗斯。你好吗?" He greeted Russia. The taller man just nodded.

"早上好 中国。" The other replied automatically. They talked for a bit and I looked sideways at America. He was flat on the ground, pleading for them to go away. "This is Germany. My friend." Russia suddenly took me by the shoulder and pushed me in front of himself. "Germany, this is Mr. China and Vietnam." The shorter man, China, bowed slightly and Vietnam shook my hand lightly. Vietnam was wearing western style clothing, a white dress shirt and a tan vest and a nón la hat as well as metal framed slim rectangular glasses. China was different. He was wearing traditional clothing for his region, which was a dark blue and gold hanfu. He was all smiles and didn't rush to leave very soon, preferring to comfortably chat with Russia in what I assumed to be Chinese. Vietnam looked a little bored as he scanned the surrounding with his dark brown eyes like a falcon. Trying to not attract Vietnam's attention, I looked back at America, who was silently panting to not be heard. He was trying to move back out of sight, which was difficult under Vietnam's watch. He wouldn't get far either. There was the conglomerate north wall in the back of him and he couldn't go forward. He mouthed the words 'please hurry up' at me.

"It was very nice to see you Russia!" China finally was ending. "I was very glad to meet you again."

"Yes, I am as well." Russia bowed slightly to him.

"Have a good day." China took Vietnam by the crook of the arm. "We must go now."

"Nice to see you." Vietnam said in a deep voice. "Bye." When they left, America stumbled out of his hiding place dramatically.

"Why. Were. You. Taking. So. Long?" He said each word with a pant.

"What? I was talking to Mr. China. I haven't seen him for a long time." Russia raised his eyebrows. "What's wrong with that?"

"*He* was there." America shuddered.

"*Who*?" Russia said dryly and crossed his arms.

"Him. Vietnam."

"Oh, please. He's not that bad. He's in my German class."

"Never taking German. No offense Germany." America shook his head. "I'm not big friends with Nam. If you must know."

"I saw. That was weird. I could barely contain myself." Russia huffed. "But let's go." And he marched on and out through the north gates without saying another word.

"Where are we going?" America asked again.

"To the cliff." Russia said nonchalantly. "To drop you off it."

"Am I such a bad friend?" He asked with a little hurt in his voice.

"More like annoying and strange." Russia smiled. "Like a lot of people around me are." America rolled his eyes in response.

"Am I?" I asked.

"No. You're an exception." He took my hand to walk with me side by side. "Because I like you."

"Can you guys save the mushyness for later?" America pushed us apart. "I want to see this cliff Russ' talking about."

"I wasn't being mushy." Russia wrapped his arm around my shoulders this time. "Just normal. Saying the truth."

"Learn to lie a little."

"Okay. I love everyone and the world is perfect." Russia smiled very unnaturally and widely. "How's that?"

"Brilliant. A bit more, and you'd become a politician."

"That's why I'm going into the hard sciences. To not deal with this stuff." He turned to me. "I suggest you too. You're pretty good in class. Better than most others."

"Um, well...I was thinking of something else...like economics." I stammered. "Hard sciences are my aptitude but not passion." I knew Russia liked me, but how far could it stretch? He was unpredictable when it came to emotions, and his face was unreadable. I knew his thoughts on aptitude versus passion. It mirrored USSR's view. Yet he shrugged all the same.

"Whatever. Your choice." He said, but without the coldness. "Even though I would say each according to his ability." We came off of the wide paved road and I remembered how me, Finland and Estonia came this way months ago. This time the grasses were all shriveled and brown, barely poking out of the snow mounds, and the small beaten path looked rougher, covered in half melted permafrost. We reached the endpoint, and looked down at the vast flowing ocean, the huge rolling waves of water too salty to drink. The scene wasn't as exalting as during the sunset, but it was nice all the same. The warm sun shone down upon us, and with the sound of the waves and the heat of the sun, I felt myself doze off a little. Russia sat down near the edge, and America scouted around for a WiFi connection he would never get. I felt myself slide down into Russia's lap and he didn't protest to my action, instead petting my head affectionately.

"Isn't it nice here?" I mumbled.

"Yes. Very." He said back. "I still come here and think wow, it will never tire me."

"It's just one of those places that magically attracts people to it. It's not even very special."

"If it was not special, why would it be magically attracting?"

"That's a thought." I laughed, gently pushing his hand so that he continued petting me. I was starting to like it. I used to not like being pet by anyone, even my father or such. But I kind of have a deep trust in Russia that I haven't felt in anyone else. Like it was meant to be. I looked up at him only to find his lavender gaze on me already. He smiled. At first those eyes were cold like the taiga, fierce and unattainable. Now, they radiated warmth, trust and sincerity. I looked deep into the mysterious cold Russian soul and

found what millions have tried to find. Acceptance.

你好 俄罗斯。你好吗? - Hello Russia. How are you?

早上好 中国 - Good morning, China.

I took Chinese in eighth grade, which was a long time ago. Hopefully I got it right.

Essays, Penmanship and Hugs

[image]

After yesterday, Iceland arrived in the early evening, looking more disheveled than I've ever seen him before. I woke at five thirty in the morning, went out for a quick run and came back to see Iceland still sleeping. If I let him sleep, he wouldn't be able to have breakfast. I decided for him that food was more important than sleep at the moment.

"Iceland, wake up." I shook him till he groaned and pushed me away.

"Ugh, what?" He said hoarse from sleep. I went over to open the blackout curtains and the light spilled into the room. Well, as much light as the clouds outside let it. I opened the balcony door to let in some of the cold air, for the disgusting smell of carbon dioxide was intoxicating.

"Ah, the light!" Iceland hissed.

"I don't want you to starve today," I countered. "I decided for you."

"I think I could go without food,"

I shook my head. "No, you wouldn't. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day."

"You sound like my brother Sweden. He also flutters around, telling us that." He picked out a grey sweatshirt and black slacks, and then moped into the bathroom. I fetched my ushanka from the desk, took my books for the first half of the day, and dutifully waited for Iceland to finish. After a couple of more complaints from him, we set out. The clocks outside struck seven times, and streams of students poured out into the dining hall. Unfortunately it was early, and many other people had the same idea as I. We sat down near the entrance, to be able to leave early as well. Many people looked tired and not ready to go back to how things ran, yet no one had a

choice, really. Iceland head tethered dangerously over his bowl of porridge before I moved it out of the way.

"Hello, Iceland, wake up already." I nudged him with his spoon.

"Why didn't you let me sleep?"

"Because you would most definitely skip breakfast." A voice behind us said. I whipped around to see tall Finland staring at his brother.

"Finland, is that you?" Iceland didn't turn around.

"No. It's Norway." He made his voice a bit clearer and brighter.

"Go away Norway." Iceland mumbled.

Instead, Finland sat down next to his brother. "Wake up already. We came early for you to catch up on sleep. If it weren't for you, we'd come at two in the morning." Unlike his brother, Finland looked fresh and ready for the day. He was wearing a light blue sweatshirt with a Finnish proverb printed in black, an interesting choice for somebody who preferred practical and minimalistic clothing. He prodded his younger brother once more. "Iceland..."

"Russia didn't let me sleep. Now you're not."

"The dining hall isn't a place for sleep." Finland pointed out.

"Just let me sleep a bit."

"No. Tonight you can go to sleep early." Finland nudged Iceland once more. "But for now you have to be awake. What will Professor Holland say?"

"Nothing. He'll let me sleep."

"Iceland." Finland said sternly, unnatural for such a laidback man. "Remember what you promised me."

Iceland wilted once more and then sat up. "Okay, okay. I promised." He started to eat his now cold porridge and Finland smiled in triumph. We ate in silence, or as much as the crowded hall would

let us. I was annoyed at the sounds, and I didn't realise how snappy I got till Iceland started to talk. "Russia," he said, but to me it sounded like a whine and I couldn't stand it.

"What?" I snapped back. Finland looked at me with a mix of surprise, interest and caution.

Iceland looked lost. "Um, never mind."

"No. Go on."

"Why are you so mad all of a sudden?" He became defensive, his scarlet eyes flashing. "I wanted to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"I was going to ask something, but I forgot already." He stood up, mumbling to himself about something. "We need to go now."

"Have a good day," Finland patted Iceland on the head. "Grow a bit more, and you might be my height. Hei Hei."

"Bye." Iceland took his bag, waved half heartedly at me and left. For a fleeting moment, I thought he was angry at me and don't want to be friends anymore. But that passed as soon as it came into my head. He was my flatmate. He had no choice but to be friends. Anyway, one incident wasn't enough to rift a friendship. I left for English, and almost came late. Germany was already there and he waved to me when I entered.

"Did he say anything?" I whispered as I set my books down.

"Not yet." He said back. "All he said was we're going to start writing essays this week."

"Just what I need. My writing is unintelligible."

"I write in print letters," Germany said. "My cursive isn't very good."

"I write in cursive in Russian." I told him, writing out my name. "I've tried to write in print, but it doesn't work out very good."

"A lot of people are starting to transition to print instead of cursive. But all that is dominated by text messaging and emails. Soon we won't be able to figure out who wrote what...all of it will be in digital!"

"That would be unfortunate." I argued. "Penmanship is indispensable."

"Maybe...they stopped teaching cursive in schools; I've never learned it." He admitted.

"Nobody taught us either. My father demanded I be taught."

He shrugged. "Interesting. I wish I was. Cursive looks very pretty."

"Not mine. You can't even read it." I sighed. He looked at me with sympathy, but said nothing since Mr. UK stood up and cleared his throat.

"Welcome back, everyone," he started. "I hope you are all ready to start our new unit. It's a small one, I'm afraid, since the semester is almost at an end." A few murmurs resonated from the back. "Yes, it is. And this unit is going to be about writing essays." He moved to his blackboard and wrote the word 'essay' on the board. "And we will start with an essay length of three hundred or so words and end with at least a twenty page essay by the end." I could feel my jaw drop. Twenty pages? Of coherent wording that makes actual sense? No, I couldn't do that.

"Germany, I'm going to need your help." I hissed.

"I'm sure you'll do fine." He murmured back. "Anyways, we get to pick the topic, I think. I mean, he should let us." Mr. UK was busily explaining what each part of an essay was, and outlined important notes and facts to consider.

"We'll be going over a span of topics," Mr. UK drew a circle around 'essays'. "One - socioeconomic issues and statutes in the world. Second - war, and profound effects. Third - Ideology and contemporary life. And our last topic will be society and the ind-I-vid-u-al." He pronounced each syllable while writing and turned to

us. "Those will be highlighted throughout our writing. As well as focusing on basic and advanced structuring, grammar and vocabulary, we will be going over formatting, overall editing and revision applications. Peer proofreading and work will be string advised, although not compulsory." He ended his long winded speech and smiled. "Questions?" I was dazed, both by the daunting amount of work and by what he said. I raised my hand.

"Yes Russia?"

"Um, we'll be going over all of those topics, right? Not writing a twenty page essay on all of them...?"

A couple of laughs came from the class. "Of course not! Only one. And you'll get to decide." Mr. UK assured me hurriedly. "But for now, let's consider this topic," he wrote 'sample essay' on the board. "We will start the lesson by writing a one page essay on the question...what do you characterise as most important? And of course, why so? This seems like an easy sort of question, but when you think about it, you might delve into the question." He went over to his desk and clapped his hands. "Without further ado, take a sheet of notebook paper and get started. Remember, three points, an introduction and a closure." A great shuffling dominated the room as everyone scrambled to get a paper and start writing. The shuffling was soon replaced by busy chatter. I turned to Germany, who already wrote his introduction and was starting his first paragraph. I could just stare.

"What?" He looked at me.

"How can you already be writing your first paragraph?" I asked. "I haven't even thought of my topic yet."

"Well, the topic was easy. At least for me. And the introduction isn't much at all." Germany pressed his pen to the paper, and started to write again, with his strange print letters. They were so small and neatly written. So organised and precise. I sighed and started with my own writing. I decided to write the truth, since I couldn't make up a convincing enough lie. I wrote about how my family was my grounding and my community, and no matter how much we fight and hate each other, at the end of the day, we'd still be there.

Watching out for each other. Though not as neat and precise as Germany's writing, my loopy cursive wasn't as bad as I imagined. In truth, I haven't written in English for a long time. Most of my writing has been in Russian or just writing down mathematical models and symbols along with respective Greek letters. In a half hour I did the minimum required from me, when Mr. UK asked us to submit our work.

"I'm sorry, sir. My writing might be incoherent." I told him as I handed the paper over. Mr. UK paused to look at it.

"Hmm, I think it is superb. I don't see much cursive anymore." He smiled. "Don't worry, chap. It's very good."

"Thank you, sir." I backed out from the crowd of people giving him their papers. He proceeded the lesson on introductory paragraphs as soon as he collected all of the papers. I took notes this time. I didn't want to have the lowest grade in English, after all.

"Why are you so worried, Russia?" Germany asked me once more, now for the fifth time today. We were waiting for the rest of our engineering class to come. Luxembourg was busily printing something out and shuffling though stacks of paper. I could definitely tell that his light blue skin was darker than normal, and that he spent most of his winter recess somewhere warm. He was wearing a woollen sweater, a novelty, since he usually wore a t shirt no matter the weather. Periodically, he would shiver.

"I'm not worried." I looked into his eyes. They were a bit sceptical but apprehensive all the same.

"Really?" He said in such a funny tone that I had to laugh.

"Germany, you need a prize or something. You made Russia laugh." Luxembourg turned to us. "I've never ever heard him laugh at anything but bad Russian translated anecdotes."

"This isn't the first time." I said. Luxembourg started to sing a song about peace and happiness in a mix of Luxembourgish and Dutch.

From the fragments that I could translate. I made small talk with Germany for a bit, until Japan leaped into the classroom and yowled in delight when she saw us. Coming up to us, she hugged us with a tight ferocity.

"I missed you guys so much!" She seemed elated at seeing us. "I missed school so much as well!"

"Hi Japan," Germany rubbed his neck where she pressed her arm.

"How was your recess?" I asked her.

"So proper Russia," she teased. "It was fine. A bit boring, actually. I helped my mom, kept my lazy brothers busy and made sure that my dad didn't cook stir fry every day."

"So mostly like ours." Germany said.

"You also had to break up your twin brothers simultaneously begging your stepfather to not cook rice for the twelfth day in a row while your mother turns up the Japanese radio on maximum because she can't hear?" She cocked her head to the side innocently.

"Er, no." I interjected. "My grandfather came over. But that's about it."

"Oh, well. That's nice. With everyone back in the house, it was chaos. My brothers and I are in one year, and my step-brother is in his third year. He was trying to study for his classes, but nobody would let him, so he locked himself in his room for most of the time. My mom needs help getting around, so naturally I had to do it."

"That sounds tough," I told her.

"It was," she nodded. "But I'm happy to be here again with you guys!"

"Us too." Germany smiled. She looked at us for a long moment and flicked her ears.

"What's wrong with you guys?" She said suddenly.

"What's wrong?" I asked stupidly.

"My senses tell me that there's something going on between you two." She smiled devilishly. I looked at her very coldly; too bad Germany blushed and gave away everything. "Hah! Knew it! I knew it! Russia, I told you I have soothsayer abilities!"

"Uh, no. You still have bad foresight. You told me I'll find a girl here. I knew about Germany for a time."

"Still," she said decidedly. "I was right....did you kiss already?"

"No. And not for a while." I shook my head. "Stop asking questions." She just moved on to interrogate Germany.

"Japan, I'm not answering," Germany pushed her away lightly. "Seriously."

"But I was right, I was right!" She bounced around.

"Japan was correct, everyone," Luxembourg announced, and stood up. "Hey, welcome back, every other teacher probably asked you this same question. So I'll be the copycat: How was your break?" A few murmurs from the students echoed though the class. "Great. So what we'll be doing today concerns us with particle motion as well as the ability to integrate. Important question: who does not know what an integral is or how to integrate at least indefinite integrals? It's really important." He looked around to see if anyone had said anything and then continued. "Okay, if everyone is all set, let's get started."

"I only know indefinite ones." Japan hissed near me. "I have trouble with the definite integrals." Luxembourg passed around sheets of paper with a couple of practice problems on them. He didn't give one to me.

"Where's mine?" I asked, peering over Germany's shoulder.

"You get to help me." Luxembourg waved me over. A clunky piece of metal that looked roughly like an engine of sorts stood next to his desk. "Do you know what this is?"

"To say honestly, no I do not."

"It's an engine," he clarified. "And not just any. This is the engine of a nuclear submarine." I looked at it one more time. Was it really? It looked as though it was from a large car, but not of such an extremely complex apparatus like a nuclear submarine. "And I was asked to fix it and install it back. I know that you told me you wanted to be a nautical or nuclear engineer. This is a mix of both." He looked back at me, tilting his head up on account of our height difference. "So what do you think? Do you want to try it out? I'll claim the responsibility, don't worry. And I'll also help if necessary."

"Okay. I'll try." I said. "So I have to-,"

"Figure out the problem and basically design a new part." He cut me off again.

"You're not going to be putting it back into the submarine, right?" I asked nervously.

"As a matter of fact, we are." He nodded. "But you forget that these kinds don't have people in them. Well, not usually." He looked at me once more. "So are you ready, or not?"

"I'm not making any promises," I warned him. He gave me a thumbs up and left me to my own devices. How nice. Finding the problem wasn't so hard. It was a burnt out piston that drove the axle. The hard part was to actually make the burnt piston work again. It wasn't as easy at it seems at first. I couldn't look at the old part to design the new one, since it was so badly damaged. I had to make one from scratch. That required research and mathematical models and computations. That might take me days to do.

"Alright everyone," Luxembourg clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "How did you do?" He walked around, nodding at some, sighing at others. "So next time, using these same computations that you've made, we'll be applying the math to the metal, as to say. Remember what we did before the break? Well, we will be doing almost the same thing, but with more of my guidance. Got it?....Alright, if there are no questions, class is over. Remember to bring your calculations from today back!" He trotted over to me and

peered over my shoulder. "So how's it going?"

"Bad. I've found the problem, but it will be hard to fix it."

"It's the piston, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's okay Russia. It's my responsibility anyway. If you feel you want to continue, I'll let you. If not, that's okay and I'll design the new piston. Usually when the piston is broken, that means a mechanism is either weak, or something is rubbing against the side."

"No, I can try to. But not on my own."

"Okay, sound good." He smiled. "I'll walk you through the designing stage. Or have you done that before?"

"No, never. Just simple repair; sometimes I did engine work, but I already had a design set." He nodded in understanding.

"Alright then, see you next time." I quickly packed up and left, only to have Japan tug me to the side.

"Where do you think you're going?" She asked.

"Um, to put my stuff away," I yanked my arm out of her grip. She shook her head and sighed.

"No, Russia. Come with us. I haven't seen you in so long." She begged.

"Am I going to trapse along with a stack of books in my arms?"

"You can make iceberg take them....actually he wants to come too." She looked down at her phone, simultaneously talking with me and texting with Iceland.

Germany tapped my shoulder lightly. "You can put your things in my college mailbox." He suggested quietly. "It's big enough. And it's closer."

"Thank you." I told him. Japan looked at us in a funny way and then giggled to herself. Germany looked at her confused, and I could just roll my eyes.

"You guys are so funny!" She squeaked.

"I was just suggesting," Germany said. "You wanted Russia to hurry up, so I told him that he can just drop his books off in my mailbox."

"Still," She pranced down the hall. "I think you guys are cute together."

"Just don't mention it to Iceland," I groaned. "Because then I'll truly never hear the end of it."

"Wrong thing to say," Germany took my hand automatically. "That's the first thing she'll tell him."

Why I love you

[image]

"Ну чёрт!" Russia swore again after Japan snuck behind him. "Japan!" We were in the park we found the name to: Silent Creek. Unfortunately, there was no silence nor a creek in the whole park, that we knew of, because of the amounts of people (mostly students) and the noise that Japan and Russia were making. Japan looked to stalk behind someone, like a cat, and then pounce lightly on their shoulders... exactly like a cat. She already succeeded to surprise me, Iceland and Russia altogether, but she liked Russia's reaction afterward, so she kept on. We were sitting on the ground near some pine trees. The ground was kind of moist, but the pine needles on the earth made sort of a blanket to absorb the moisture. We were lucky there was no snow there. Our current topic was complaining about the schedule.

"I never thought that the most renowned university would have the least freedom to choose majorical subjects." Russia flicked Japan away so that she didn't sneak up on him anymore. He was very passive towards me for the most part, and remained apart. I understood that it was so that Iceland didn't get any hints; surprisingly enough Japan didn't say anything, nor acted suspiciously. I played along as well, acting as though nothing happened over the past month between me and Russia. I did know that this kind of large secret would eventually be revealed, and the more it's suppressed the worse it would get, but I didn't want to embarrass Russia. So I did my part.

"Like what?" Iceland asked. "I think that it's fine. Reminds me of high school."

"That's the problem," Russia answered. "Exactly like high school. Without social emotional class. Which I'm grateful for."

"What is social emotional class?" Japan rounded her eyes.

"The stupidest thing in the world," Russia raved on. "We had to hold hands and talk through our problems. As if I wanted to do that. We also didn't really know each other, so we needed to tell everyone our favourite colour, animal and food. The basic and lowly things. As if I could tell something by your food preferences, unless to determine social class." He shook his head. "I always said black caviar. As if I had it on a daily basis."

"Sounds tough," Iceland conceded. "I didn't have that. But I went to a private school."

"Ooh, so wealthy," Russia teased. "I went to a school with a number for a name. It was even one of the best in the region. School thirty three."

"Did you have to wear uniforms?" Iceland asked. "Because I did. I hate khaki polyester pants and navy blue shirts now. Since I've been wearing that for more than sixteen years." He shuddered at the thought.

"Yes. We did." He nodded. "It was a white dress shirt and black pants. You had to buy them at a particular store too. And don't forget the epalettes. They had to have the school number on them. So all in all, my uniform was almost like an officer's."

"See, I wouldn't mind that kind of uniform." Iceland picked at the pine needles. "Mine is just plainly horrible."

"We also needed to have physical education clothing." Russia continued. "And those had to be bought at a special store as well. I got a reimbursement check my last four years, but that's because my father wasn't going to pay for a new uniform every half year."

"Why half year?" Japan looked confused.

"I was growing," he admitted. "A bit too fast. And buying two pairs of clothing every half year was an unimaginable cost."

"How much?"

"About five thousand rubles for a dress shirt with epalettes," Russia counted. "I don't know how much that's in pounds, but it's a lot."

"Five thousand?"

"It's sounds like much, but when you convert it, it's less," Russia said to her. "But I'm glad that this place doesn't have uniforms."

"Universities aren't supposed to," Iceland pointed out. "Only vocational schools or officer's training schools do."

"But in a way, this sort of reminds me of high school," Russia reverted back to the original topic. "But with more work."

"Actually, there's even less. Did you know that midterm exams are coming up?" I cut in.

"Yes," Russia smiled at Iceland's facial expression of horror. "I knew."

"There are midterms?" He asked me in a whisper. "What?"

"You still have time to study," I assured him. "It's still two weeks from now."

"They didn't even say anything!" He whined.

"They expect you to know and look at the calendar." Russia said.

"That's what the two red dots on your calendar are!" Iceland looked at Russia, while the other nodded. "Exam dates."

"Mhmm." He smiled. "I've set a schedule. I suggest looking at your language and mathematics courses. Those are usually the subjects that require study."

"What language do you take?"

"German," I saw Japan look sideways at me, but I shrugged in her direction. He was taking German even before I even came into the

picture.

"I take Spanish," I said before Japan could say anything. "It's a popular language to take. It's also easy, since Professor Spain is both for biology and for Spanish. It's not the best class, but maybe I'm saying that because I don't have an affinity for Spanish language."

"Wise decision." Iceland nodded. The birds twittered in the distance, and the sky was a lighter shade of grey than usual. I didn't expect much from Mr. UK's island weather, but I was surprised. I thought it would always be rainy and wet. I was proven wrong.

"I heard that professor Spain sets up a whole presentation and cultural festival with each of his Spanish classes," Japan said.

"If so, I haven't heard of it," I tried to act calmly. A cultural festival? I can't dance or sing, unless you like whispered opera. I didn't like showing off either. I couldn't stand up and do something. I always needed a plan.

"Maybe he isn't doing it this year," Russia picked at the pine needles in the trees. "You never know."

"I take nothing." Iceland smiled. "I'm putting off world languages and cultures till last year."

"Hmm, I guess you could. I take Korean. It's easy for me and I can ask my brothers for help. I know a lot of it. Speaking is the hard part." Japan said. "I'm starting to narrow down, now that I've finished most of the prerequisites. Next semester I'll be taking computer science courses."

"Same with me." Russia nodded. "I've figured to focus on maths and engineering, and I was recommended environmental science. I don't know why, but I guess I'll take it. All in all, I'm doing the bare minimum." He took his ushanka off and placed it on the ground. "As you may have noticed, if I don't want to do something, it'll never get done."

"Doesn't your head get sunburnt?" Japan asked.

"Yes, all the time." He smiled. "That's why I mostly wear my

ushanka anyway, so it doesn't matter much."

"That's the reason I don't like the summers," Japan made a face. "Because then I become all pink and hear from my father all month long."

"Come off it," Iceland cut in. "Summer is the best time of year. My sister comes home and I don't have to wear a jacket."

"I personally like the spring," Russia said, standing up. "It's both warm and it slips into summer. Best of both worlds. And it's not too hot in the night time either."

"Where are you going again, mister?" Japan asked in a sassy tone.

"I can't sit for a long time." He said. "Let's go."

"And we're all going to heed to you?" She raised her eyebrows, while me and Iceland stood up as well. "Seriously guys?"

"What?" Iceland put his arms up. "He has a point." I nodded.

"Germany, I thought you'd be more inclined on sitting."

I smiled apologetically at her. "Sorry, Japan. He's kind of right." She huffed, but stood up all the same. Japan fell in line, chattering to Iceland, who would just nod and never get a chance to say anything. I walked side by side with Russia behind them. I noticed him matching up to my short and frequent stride. He slipped his hand in mine without a word, and I clenched it. I looked up at him and when we made eye contact his face became so red that I had to laugh.

"What?" He kept blushing.

"You have absolutely not control over your emotions," I laughed. He looked sideways at Japan and Iceland in case they were eavesdropping, but Japan seemed to be quite the entertainer.

"No. I do...sometimes," he protested. "It's just I haven't ever said that I liked anyone. Until you came around."

"Sweet," I chirped. "I think you're a sweet person." I actually surprised myself by saying that. Half a year ago I would stumble around, mumbling to myself and handing my head down in defeat, shying away from any socialising. I was now pretty comfortable talking to people and even made eye contact. Professors and staff alike told me I changed. But I still wouldn't go out of my way to talk. I have limits as well. We walked along the path, and came up to an unfamiliar place.

"Oh look. The creek." Russia pointed to it. "Finally. I thought that these people were lying." The bridge going over the almost still, but barely trickling body of water had no sides, and it looked old and stoic. We went over the small bridge after Japan and Iceland, and I looked down to see my reflection and froze. I didn't move. Russia tugged at my arm, but I wouldn't move. I couldn't move. Where my reflection should've been was my father's face, staring wide eyes back at me. I blinked twice. It did too. I backed away from it slowly, shaking my head.

"R-russia." I whispered.

"What's wrong?" I almost gasped aloud. Next to my father's face came another. Instead of Russia's youthful complexion, USSR's serious and grave face looked out on me. "Germany, what's wrong?" He asked again. I reached down enough to touch the water. The reflection stirred, but didn't change.

"Do you see this?" I could see that whatever I and Russia did, so did the reflections. My father's face was scared and panicky, while USSR's was confused and a little worried.

"See what?" Russia squinted into the water. "It's just us. Looking back into ourselves." Apparently I was gifted enough to see this. The reflections were so real, so close, so scary. I tilted my head to the side and smiled. Immediately, the reflection did the same, flashing a sharp toothed smile. I backed away completely, and ran, or in my case, scrambled across the bridge. Russia came to my side and brushed my shoulders. "Germany, what did you see?"

"I-I can't s-say." I shut my eyes. Iceland and Japan were far off and long gone. Russia didn't press me for information further, instead he

hugged me till I felt calmer, and we could move on.

"Let's not keep Japan or Iceland waiting," he murmured, taking my hand and picking up the pace. "They might think we've drowned or something." We walked for a time in silence. The woods got sparse, and the pines turned to bare maples and oaks. Many of them were bare, or else having a few dried brown leaves still clinging on to the trees fiercely. As we walked, I tried to wrap my mind around what I just saw. I wanted to desperately fit it into reality. I leaned against Russia's side, and he put his arm around me. "Still not going to tell me what is wrong?"

"Ah," I sighed. "You won't believe it."

He looked down softly at me. "What makes you think so?"

"It's in your personality,"

"It doesn't mean that I won't necessarily believe what you said." He gently rubbed my arm. "Please. Tell me."

"Okay," I shuddered. "When I looked down into the water....I saw...I..." I paused for a long time. He did t rush me, but I could feel that his patience was starting to slide. Once again, I composed myself and raised my head. "I saw my father's reflection in the water instead of mine. And your reflection was your father's." I said quickly and fell silent. I knew that Russia was very sensitive to the topic of my father, the war and everything that tied up to that. I definitely felt him tense up when I said that. But he didn't say anything, instead he gruffly huffed and stayed silent exactly like his dad. I bent my head low. We walked on silently, and he said nothing for a time. Then, when I was about to turn and tell him that I made the whole thing up, he opened his mouth to speak.

"I somehow believe what you saw." He said slowly. "Because the same thing happened to me. Once."

"Really?" I looked up.

"Yes. One time. Never again." He shook his head slowly. "I saw myself as who I am now. A university student. Richer and happier

than my six year old scruffy self." He looked at me, his light lavender eyes turning majestic deep purple that looked like his grandfather's. "I thought it was prophetic." I froze up from fear. Not prophetic....no. It was just a flitting shadow, a trick of light...but I saw it twice, and it mirrored all my movements, not behaving on its own.

"Do...you think that....it was an omen."

He waved my comment away. "Not really. I stopped believing in omens for some time. Only in superstitions." He smiled. "No. I don't think what you saw was an omen or prophecy of a sort. Just....I can't explain it, but it's not something bad. Just is, that's all." His gaze softened and turned back to its lighter shade. "Did you think I would hate you just because you saw the reflection of your father's face in a shallow river? I might be impatient and snappy, but I'm not irrational. And I'm not going to let the past dictate the future. I love you Germany. It's because you're shy and smart and caring. I wouldn't let history be the barrier that divides." His words punctured a hole in my past worries. I felt free and liberated, as if chains that held me down for so long have rusted away. I hugged him fiercely, free at last. "I guess that means you're happy." Russia chuckled.

"Yes," I said happily.

"Come on, Japan and Iceland are probably waiting." He started to walk even faster than before. "We don't need to have them double back and do search and rescue here." He laughed at his strange little joke. He gave me an injured half grin, and I followed him. Even though I was elated to hear that he didn't judge me for my family's mistakes anymore, I was still a bit disturbed. I didn't understand why Russia's reflection changed. I would have thought that only mine should have changed, not that I wanted it to. But *why*? I knew one thing for sure was that I wasn't going to tell anyone what I saw.

Ну чёрт - A half-swear half-surprised exclamation. The word «чёрт» (choert) means almost like a devil.

From Whisper to Problem

[image]

Arguably, the university was much better than being stuck at home. Our tiny apartment on the second floor of my dad's restaurant meant that we didn't have a separate room. My twin brothers, South and North Korea shared a room. My dad and my handicap mother shared one and consequently I shared a room with my step brother, Vietnam. In my dorm room, I only had to share the whole complex with one other girl. She was also in the first year and her name was Columbia. She was professor Spain's granddaughter and she loved coffee, because she grew up near plantations. She was also amazed at the amount of space we had. I struck out on my own as soon as we came to the university, preferring to stay away from my brothers. Soon enough, I found a burly and sarcastic guy in one of my classes and we started to talk. Just like that. I came up to him and we just started to talk about the university. His name was Russia and I had the nagging feeling that he would fall in love with someone and soon, told me my soothsayer powers. He introduced me to his cold and slow friend, Iceland and then we met Germany. He was the funniest and most shy person I've met. I instantly knew that Russia would eventually like him. And I told him so. Of course, the gifted are always rejected. Nonetheless, I was happy that they finally came together. Russia became less gruff and sarcastic and Germany was less shy and mumbly. For some reason, they asked for me to keep their relationship a secret. I, of course, heeded to their wishes, but it seemed irrational. At the moment, I was listening to one of Iceland's adventures on a mountain cliff. I have to say, it's kind of boring; my father scaled mount Everest twice.

"And so," he was in the middle of his thrilling adventure. "I was on the cliff face and about to fall...and then..." I yawned loudly. He seemed annoyed that I didn't pay attention to his story.

"Sorry Iceland," I yawned again. "It's pretty boring after my dad's escape from a clouded leopard."

"I'm sorry I'm not as cool as your dad." He huffed. I had to giggle.

"He's hard to beat." I nodded. "But he still can't keep everyone in my family under control."

"How many siblings do you have?"

"Two twin brothers and a step brother. But me, North and South Korea are all the same age. That makes us impossible to have quiet and behaving. My older step brother is too quiet and too behaving. He's kind of weird and keeps to himself. But he can sway my dad's opinion pretty easily."

"Sounds like a memorable bunch of people you are," he smirked. "My family is the opposite. We're all quiet. Not so much behaving though."

"You don't have to be behaving and quiet. Look at Russia. Prime example. He listens to what his father tells him, but he's not going to sit down and shut up when he's told to by someone else." I pointed out.

"Speaking of whom, what's the matter with Russia anyway?" He questioned. Well, time to use my super talking skills to worm out of the conversation.

"Hey look! A bird!" I yelled randomly, pointing at the sky. Several people on the benches around us turned and looked and then giggled and went back to their business. I, in turn, kept hopping around, generally make a fool of myself and running after the imaginary bird. Iceland, with his long stride, had no trouble keeping up with me.

"Where's the bird?" He asked, squinting.

"Okay. It flew away now." I panted. He looked at me with a strange expression and suspicion made his red gaze sharper.

"You're not telling me something Japan." He said slowly.

"Yes, I'm not." I told him passively. My mother's old trick would come in handy now. Stay simply calm, as if everything was planned

to be a horrible failure and hat you have a grandiose plan B.

"So tell me." He bent over to be my height. I wanted him to come a bit closer. And closer.

"I'll tell you in a whisper." I said cryptically. Sure enough, he leaned in close and I lightly tapped his face with the Palm of my hand. His shock was so great that he reeled. I took the opportunity to hare away as fast as my legs could take me. And why do I wear such bright clothing? Oh, yes. To be seen. That was now my enemy. I rolled into some bushes and waited. Iceland ran heavily along the little path, calling my name. I stayed tense till he passed. His footsteps faded father away and I pricked my ears, straining to hear. Nothing. I quietly climbed out of the bushes to be taken by the scruff and lifted into the air. "AAAH!" I screeched.

It was Iceland. "Got you! Sneaky little cat!" He set me down on the ground. I hissed playfully in his direction.

"Away!" I jabbed my hand into the air, as a warning. He shook his head and sighed.

"So what's with Russia and Germany then?" He asked, a little smile on his face.

"Promise you won't tell?" I gasped. "Because Russia told me not to tell you or else he wouldn't hear the end from you and I..."

"That's one complicated thread."

"Definitely."

"So what's with them? Are they...?"

"Yes."

"You don't say so."

"Just please, please, please, don't tell." I begged.

"I'm not that dumb." He looked in the direction from which we came. I could see faint outlines of Germany and Russia coming

along the path. "I'll keep a secret."

"Too many secrets, too many lies, too many threads." I sighed. "Once the truth comes out, all of us will turn upon each other."

"But we haven't told America yet."

"True." I conceded. "Let's keep it that way."

"Why is this a secret again?" He asked.

"Because Russia is too stubborn to admit I was right. Oh, and he doesn't obviously want to tell his father anything."

"Hmm, I would've." He said as we greeted them both. We didn't speak about our little incident, but Germany looked a little scared and Russia looked grave. What happened I never got to know. We could just enjoy the rest of our walk in the setting sun.

"So Japan, how's it been going?" South Korea asked me, jabbing his chopsticks into his food once more.

"Okay." I picked at my fish.

"Did you fight or something?" North asked gruffly. He was reading his stupid book again. I usually ate dinner with my twin brothers in their dorm room. It wasn't much different than mine, except you could distinguish which part of the room was who's. South preferred to upfront show his personality and decked his part up with colourful streamers. North kept his part 'tidy' and muted. By tidy it meant pushing all of his stuff in a closet and under his bad and forgetting about it. He was reading a book for his language class and it was in Russian. I couldn't even read the title. The book seemed not too lengthy, but I guessed that he had a hard time reading it, because he's been doing so for the past five months. And he hasn't even gotten three fourths though.

"What's wrong Japan?" South asked sympathetically. "You've been blue the whole evening."

"I had some problems." I chewed my cold fish slowly. "With my friends."

"Trouble with friends?" North said disbelief flashing in his dark brown eye. "But you're a natural at making friends."

"No North. I didn't keep a secret."

"Well it's their problem." He took a piece of the spicy red fish from the middle of our table and starred to chew it. "Not yours." The little light in between us flickered a bit.

"Was it big?" South pried the book out of North's hands. The other gave him a murderous look.

"Its kind of destructive." North started to grope for his book silently, keeping his head towards me.

"So what? Their...problem." He huffed, a bit strained from grappling with South. "South, give....me my...book!"

"No." He put the book on the counter. "Talk with Japan like a regular person."

"I am." He hissed back at South, stuffing his hands into his brown jacket pockets.

"Guys, if you're going to fight, do it on your own time." I bristled. They turned back to me, both looking guilty.

"Sorry, Japan." South sighed. "But really, who are your friends again?"

"Iceland, Germany, America, and Russia." I counted off. North coughed.

"I thought you'd have more." He said. "I recognise most of them. Except Iceland. No idea who that is. But Russia is Soviet Union's son, Germany is Third Reich's son, the dead guy, and America the fat burger is the Headmaster's son." He sat in thought for a moment. "Hey, didn't we meet Germany? Italy told us that he was his childhood friend. I kind of thought he was bluffing."

"What do you have against America?" South asked him. "And yes. We did."

"He's kind of dumb. He doesn't belong here. He can manage, sure, but he can't be a student. He's way too bossy." North sniffed.

"Off topic guys," I snapped.

"So what the problem?" They both said at the same time.

"So Russia and Germany like each other and they want to keep it a secret." I said quickly.

"Trust you to keep it." North smirked. "You just told us. South is going to spread the rumour like wildfire."

"No, I'm not!" He stood up and went over to wash the plates. North inched over and grabbed his book off of the counter and smiled contentedly.

"Why don't we meet them?" South asked. North groaned as he spoke. "What?"

"No more meeting new people."

"We've met Germany." South countered.

"Who knows how he's changed? And Italy substitutes ten people." He turned to me. "We don't need to meet these people."

"North, stop being inconsiderate." South snatched the plate from which his brother was eating and wrapped the fish over for leftovers. "We'll meet them Japan. See how it goes and everything." He turned back to North. "Both of us."

"Why are we meeting them again?" North growled.

South looked as if he wanted to strangle his brother. "Because we want to figure this problem out."

"How exactly did this became a problem?" I whined, my voice rising up.

"You made it a problem." North said, nonchalant. "You can un-make it a problem. Just tell them. And then there won't be one."

"All in all. I understand what you need. Basically we go up talk and go back. Great plan." South gave me a thumbs up. "We have you covered. Right now, I suggest you get your homework done."

"Yay..." I grumbled, standing up and brushing crumbs off my pink sweater.

"Hey, don't worry! We won't let his get out of hand...right, North?"

"Yeah, sure." North looked up at me, and then back at his book. "Some of us don't like press." He looked back at me again, and I could see that he was telling the truth; surprisingly he didn't even try to lie.

"So what are we doing Japan?" South crossed over and plugged in his headphones into his phone, presumably scrolling through his playlist.

"Okay. Just....go up, talk to them a bit.....and then..." I said.

North cut me off again. "Tell them that you told us their stupid secret that shouldn't be a secret."

"North!"

"That's exactly what I'm going to say," he said, finally leaving the room and shutting himself in the bathroom. In a few moments, we heard the tiny droplets of water coming down. He turned on the shower. South sighed, and kept on washing the dishes.

"Don't pay attention to him," he murmured. "He's just mad that his book was taken away."

"Like I didn't live with him for eighteen years," I bristled. I immediately regretted what I said. But South was understanding and did nothing.

"Look, I understand your troubles, but at the same time...North has a point. This doesn't sound like a serious problem. I mean, what can

they do to you?"

"Stop being friends, spread nasty rumours, beat me....or the worst thing....ignore me."

"I don't think that it's in Germany's nature to spread any rumour. From what I saw, he's too shy and proper to do that. And Russia....I mean, he's your friend and he lives by a code. I don't think he'd step down to hurt a girl." When I didn't answer he continued. "Stop making up issues, Japan. You're being under-confident. Just like mother." He looked into the main room and shook his head. "North left his clothes in the middle of the room. Brilliant." He muttered, stopping to pick them up.

"Fine. We'll try." I sighed.

"Great. Don't forget, there are many other people around that can become your friends." He told me, ushering me out of the door. "But I don't think they'll be mad. Unless they're like North." He smiled. "Bye,"

"Bye bye." He shut the door, and yelled at his brother about some sort of mess he left on the floor. I didn't skip to my room this time. Columbia asked why I was sad. I said I had a stomach ache and then crawled under the covers of my bed, dreading tomorrow. Too bad I couldn't turn time off.

Friends, Family and a Pillar

[image]

It was only today, when I was eating my lunch in the dining hall, after my not very bad philosophy class, staring outside at the sparrows flying in the nippy February wind did I think that maybe I was becoming clingy. I didn't even think about that. I stopped chewing and thought. Did Russia find me clingy? Why was I even worried? I set down my plate and fork and just left, not even putting the utensils and plate in the trash. I went outside to find some peace, only to be bothered by America, who was wearing a bright sequin covered yellow shirt. For some reason. I sat down on one of the old wooden benches in the shade of the large hall.

"Hey Germany," he slid up to me. "Didnt you ever realise that the word 'dying' is in the word 'studying'?"

"I'm sure you're not the first one to think of that." I remarked. "Its a matter of opinion."

"Naw, you think studying is fun?" He asked, looking me over the brim of his sunglasses.

I shrugged. "Not fun. More like important."

"You need to get your priorities straight, mister." He tisked. "By the way, where might your special someone be? I need to ask him a question."

I looked at my watch. "He would be...at his drama class. Or else a

free period."

"Aw, memorized his schedule?" America cooed exactly like a mourning dove.

"Um...sort of." I felt blush creep on my cheeks. It was cold, so it might just seem like a coincidence.

"If it was his free period then he would be with you, I'll bet." He rubbed his arms, shivering slightly. Never did it occur to the American that in the winter, people are supposed to dress warmly. At least he had long pants on, but he still had, what Russia called "Sailor's Chest". He had no scarf or cowlick, was what he meant. But Russia spoke in complex vocabulary and foreign proverbs.

"You know that we don't spend every minute together, right?" I said. "We're not that close *yet*." The cold breeze stirred and America yelped form the sudden drop in temperature. Wind always made things worse, and it seemed Mr. UK's island was a harbour for it. "We still are pretty separate."

"Not for long!" America declared.

"We'll see." A deep voice behind him said.

"Oh, hi Russia!" America whipped around to face Russia. He was again with his thick binder and half frown staring down at America.

"What was the conversation about?" Russia put one of his hands into his pocket, holding his binder with his left arm. He sat down next to me, zipping up his coat midway.

"You. And Germany."

"Hmm, interesting." He flipped through his binder. "Not."

"What were you doing?" He asked curiously.

"So nosy." Russia muttered. "Doing stuff."

"Like what?"

"None of your business." Russia turned to me and started to talk as if America wasn't gaping at us. "How long is your free period?"

"As long as yours." I said, shuffling though my papers absentmindedly.

"Oh, okay." He looked up briefly watching the birds. "See you at class then." As soon as he came, he left. Just like that. It was hard to be systematic with Russia. He would plan at his own pace and time. And he would abruptly leave, both in real life and in chats. He would respond when he felt like it. But he would always pick up the phone, no matter what. America watched him go and then turned to me with a quizzical look.

"He behaves in such random ways." He noted.

"Yes. It's his personality."

"What's in his binder, I wonder." America muttered to himself. I shook my head and sighed. "I didn't even get to ask my question. I wanted to ask if he wasn't occupied tomorrow evening, so that he could see my beautiful poetry recitation. It's going to be in Spanish!"

"He'll never tell you if you keep pestering his about it." I warned, standing up. "And why are you even doing a poetry recitation?"

"We will. Trust me." He said confidently as I started to leave. "And I'm doing it because my dad told me that it expands my mind, or whatever...hey, where are you going?"

"To see someone."

"Russia?"

"Is there any other answer?" I asked, irritable. "No. A teacher." His face turned to seriousness in a second.

"Oh, well, in that case, um, go on." He waved his hands in front of him. "Go ahead." He was so serious that I had to smirk.

"See you around." I waved and walked around the corner. The

midday sun beat down on everything it touched, and many small creatures scurried about. A chipmunk was busily crunching away at a bit of cafeteria food and some really early months fluttered about. A chilling night frost would kill them. I ducked into Arbour Hall, the large cement and wood mixed building with beautiful patterns of trees and leaves. Walking down past the English hall and past filled classroom, I made my way to a small classroom in which I knew the professor was on break. I'd never thought that a retired war general would teach German language. I peeked inside the spacious wood paneled classroom to check if it was occupied with students. If I memorized the times correctly, he should be on a teacher's break. I was correct. He was sitting in a grey suit and blue tie, one of his legs crossed over the other, reading a newspaper. He had a desk lamp switched on and the computer monitor was sleeping. His face was serene and a little bored while he was flipping though the pages, finding one he liked. I stepped up and knocked the door frame, alerting my presence. His dark eyes were scanning though the pages like a photocopier, until he heard the knock and this time, his eyes were the first to travel upward, not his chin. I didn't even know why I came here. Maybe to just get away from America, but at that moment I forgot why I needed my grandfather's talking.

"Ah, Deutschland!" He smiled in my direction, setting down the paper on his desk, next to the piles of paper. One pile slid down and papers flew everywhere all over the floor. He groaned as the papers flew about from the wind of the open window. I hastily helped to pick them up, and he hugged me in thanks. "How are you doing?" He asked as he settled down back into his chair.

"Um, I'm okay." I said, feeling uncomfortable just standing in front of him. "Just wanted to come by...I haven't seen you in a while." I haven't come to him since the time we first met here. He didn't seem to be disappointed that I haven't come, even when he would call me. I even declined his offer to spend some time together after the break. I felt a bit guilty that I did so. But from my grandfather's smile, I could see that he was genuinely happy to just see me.

"Of course!" He motioned to a desk next to his, and I sat down, almost like one of his students. Unfortunately, he didn't start the

conversation, but waited for me to start. He kept on smiling, but it became a bit strained.

"Um, how was your break?" The generic question slipped though my mouth. I couldn't watch his smile twitch any longer.

"Oh, it was very good. I stayed with your great uncle for a bit. Then I left early and came back here. After all, I have my home on this island. It's not mine, but it was issued to me."

"Oh, I see." I nodded. I couldn't understand though. "What did you do?"

"With Austria Hungary? Oh, nothing much. We talked a bit, he complained for some time, then we ate dinner and things like that. Talked some more. He asked me to play cards with him....a we didn't do much else." He explained. "And you?"

My turn to answer. I should have known. "Um, well. I went to Russia's home, and I met his siblings and um, his grandfather as well." I heard a disapproving huff from him.

"Russian Empire?" He said. His expression changed in a matter of seconds. His good natured smile became a dissatisfied frown and his eyebrows went up.

"Yes."

"Hmm, not the best person ever. Did I tell you that?" He paused for a moment. "I don't like to talk ill about my peers...and I'm usually very passive about these things....yet..."

"No. He's not very nice." I cut him off quickly.

"I know. He is a bit nasty, that person." He looked at the open window. "All he can do is talk and balk."

"Well, I didn't like him. He was kind of belligerent." I tried to get out of the conversation as fast as I could.

"Indeed." He sniffed. "Even though....never mind." He reverted back to his usual cheery self and started to talk about how I should come

and meet the part of my family that wasn't dead. I said I would think about it. As soon as I was ready to leave, he called me back. "Oh, Deutschland, are you friends with Russia? I understand that you know him, but are you friends?"

"Yeees." I said slowly turning back. "Why?"

"He told me that he's your friend." He sat back in his chair. "Is that true?"

"Yes. He is." I couldn't lie, especially when he already had much information.

"That's very nice. That you're making friends. That's good. Especially with a motivated and bright student like him." He nodded. "Although he seems to be not very trusting."

"Mhmm," I slowly backed out. "I have to go now, grandpa. Um, maybe I'll come by next time."

"Of course. Come any day during this time." He waved to me and then reached for his paper again. I had to run over to my next class so that I wouldn't be late. I didn't need that.

After my pretty boring painting class in which I spilled paint all over my professor and myself, I left the arts hall covered in red, green and blue paint, all sticky and miserable. I was lucky it was a water based paint, and would come off easily, but it was already crusting and peeling. Oh, and everyone was looking at me. Again. Fortunately for me, I took my glasses off before I started the class, so I wasn't completely blind. Just embarrassed, no major problems. As I was about to open the thick barred gates of my college, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I thought it might've been Finland, but no. It was Japan. She was in a light blue long sleeve turtleneck and a black skirt that was about knee length. In her ears were pink bowed earrings and she also wore a nervous smile.

"Hey Germany." She said, her voice shaking a bit.

"Hi," I replied, pushing open the gate as I inserted my card. "How

did you recognise me?"

"Um, by your glasses." She pointed to them. "But I was wondering if you could come with me to meet some people....please?" She was fidgety and constantly held the hem of her skirt.

"Ah, could I wash myself first?" I asked as I went into the short tunnel to the courtyard. "I don't need to be further embarrassed."

"I was wondering what happened..." She lightened up a bit.

"Painting." I sighed. "Apparently, face painting."

"So....can you come?"

"Yes. I'll message when I'm ready."

"Okay! See you soon!" She ran off, and relief was stamped all over her face. I wondered what she wanted me to do. Who were those people? I went up to my room and saw Finland inside, chewing the eraser on his pencil, and repeatedly gnashing his teeth. Next to him was a collection of crumpled papers and on the desk was a blue and white patterned corelle bowl filled with something hot.

"Hello Finland," I set my books down on my bed. I resigned my table space to his papers, charts, graphs, calculator, pens, coffee, and huge whiteboard with markers.

"Hey," he looked up at me, smiling, tired. "What happened to you?" He looked me up and down.

"Accident." I said simply. "With paint."

"Hmm, they happen." Finland wasn't the one to pester for more information, or laugh at somebody's woe. He would just acknowledge it.

"I'll leave soon." I backed into the bathroom and shut myself in after I had grabbed a towel and fresh clothing. Peeling off my starch white, or what used to be starch white shirt and spattered pants, I didn't mind to test the water till I turned the knob. The water came out like liquid ice. Actually, water is liquid ice... I had to endure ten

minutes of the freezing water and as if to anger me, the water turned warm as soon as I stepped out. It took me way too long to put on my fresh clothes and then the door wouldn't open until I rammed my shoulder into it. For such a high end university, I expected better...kind of.

"Somebody texted you." Finland informed me, without looking up. "I heard."

"Oh, thanks." I said breathlessly after half falling on the floor. "Phew."

"Yeah, the doors do that." He smiled to himself. "They get stuck sometimes. I got stuck there for a long time once. I was lucky Estonia had small hands and could fiddle with the hinges." He sighed and crumpled another paper. "Wrong integral. Wrong Riemann sum. Have to take the trapezoid, not left hand. Whatever. Anyways, have a good time, wherever you're going."

"Um, you too. Good luck."

"I'll try." He laughed and then bent over his definite integrals once more. I fleetingly raced down the steps and out into the courtyard. When I reached the gate, I took out my phone to see thirty new messages by Japan. All of them said 'Germany, please answer' in caps.

"I'm back Japan." I wrote. In a second, she wrote back.

"Can you come to Willow College?" She asked. "We're all there."

"Is that...?"

"Southernmost gate." I set off to the south and had to retrace my steps. I had to stall a bit till my art professor still covered in paint left, since I didn't want her to see me. I was the one who spilled it after all. Willow College had ivy tendrils crawling up its side and small windows. I could see Japan and Russia in the distance, as well as two other people. They were familiar, but I couldn't remember their names. I think they shared a suffix. Korea. Oh, yes, North and South Korea.

"Ahhhhh! GERMANYYYY!" Japan yelled when she saw me. "Where were you?"

"I'm sorry." I apologised. "I had to get the paint off my face." Russia smiled when I said that.

"These are my brothers. South Korea and North Korea. They are twins. And the same year as me. Ten months older than me, though."

"Hey," South Korea waved to me. He had on a black leather jacket with a red shirt underneath. His dark gaze was good natured, and he stretched out a hand for me to shake. "We've met before."

"Mhmm." Was all I could say.

"Hello." North Korea muttered after his brother tugged his sleeve very noticeably. "I'm North Korea. People decide to just call me North. Because they think they can. As if North and Korea is too many syllables."

"North, we've met him before." South said. "Don't go on your tangent."

"I won't." The other sighed and shook my hand roughly as well. As bright and exuberant South was, North was muted and low profiled. It seemed that he wanted to be unnoticeable but famed at the same time.

"So, care for a walk?" South asked. Russia shrugged his shoulders but went all the same. "I know Germany because he's Italy's friend. But you, Russia. What's your story?"

"Eh, nothing much to it." Russia started slowly. "I actually never thought I'd get into this university. I applied to numerous 'safety schools' in case I didn't make it into this one. But apparently I made an impression with my father ramming his car into Mr. UK's Rolls Royce, and the fact that he refused to apologise."

"Oh, that must've been super embarrassing." South frowned. "My dad also parks how he feels he needs to."

"Hmm, yeah. But I'm motivated enough to learn, so I guess they liked that." He smiled. "You were lucky to find me today. Yesterday and tomorrow I have theatre practice at this time." We walked away from the college and down towards the east gate along a wide path around the perimeter of the campus. Short and spiked shrubs were planted on either side of the path to guard it. Every now and then you could see a small granite figurine of some sort of snake like animal crawling up a pillar and a bird atop.

"Theatre?"

"The new production that Professor France is putting on. She cast me as lead role. Just because I'll sing in Russian." Each time we passed one more statue, it seemed the snake creatures were getting closer to the bird.

"Interesting. So Japan's your friend too?" North cut in. The last pillar we went by, the snake was wrapping its body around the bird leg.

"Yes. She is. She found me actually." North eyed me, but said nothing. So did South and Japan. What were they trying to get out of us? It was definitely information. The way that North constantly gave me fleeting looks and how South stared at both me and Russia was uncomfortable. The bird looked scared of the snake, and unfurled its wings.

"Hmm, and Germany?" South said before North elbowed him in the ribs. South acted as though nothing happened, but it was hard, since he was wincing a bit. Now, the bird was completely entangled in the snake, in total shock and panic.

"About five months ago. He's a very good friend." The snake opened its mouth. It had long fangs. The bird was obviously in a silent screech.

"Just friend?" North said. The snake pierced the leg with its venomous teeth. The bird flapped viciously. Russia stopped and stared at Japan. The bird tried to nip the back bone of the snake. Japan looked at me. The snake didn't relent. Russia's eyes were whorls of molten fury. The bird tried to desperately flee, but no

avail. The snake venom went too far. Russia turned towards South slowly and bared his teeth. The bird went limp. The snake triumphed. Russia looked at me for a moment, his eyes temporarily showed desperation and then reverted back to anger.

"Well. I guess if the whole world needs to know, then why don't you tell everyone everything!" He screamed at Japan. She sunk her neck into her shoulders as Russia advanced on her. Nobody dared intervening.

"Russia..." she gasped.

"Sorry? I don't think so. No. No more. Why do I even put up with you anymore if you're going to tell everyone my private life? It was my mistake to open my mouth that time, wasn't it. Well I won't be making that mistake any more." Without another word, he pushed his way out and ran. Fast. There was no way that anyone would be able to catch him. In a matter of seconds, he was gone. Japan looked as if she was about to fall into tears and South looked uncomfortable. North looked down at the ground.

"Too early?"

"No, really?" Japan almost screeched. "Stupid idiot! Did I ask to tell him upfront?"

"Japan..." South said quietly.

"No! You too! It was your idea!" She cried out. With little tears in her eyes and sniffling, she fled as well. North folded his hands in his pockets and said nothing. I was strangely calm. If it were me in the past, I would be hiding in a bush, praying. But I felt as unruffled as an elephant.

"Sorry Germany." South whispered. "Really."

"No it's okay. Japan told you, didn't she?"

"Yes." North muttered. "She turned this small predicament into a huge issue."

"Its Japan. She always thinks that secrets aren't good." South

argued. "And look what happened."

"Eh, I'm strangely okay with this." I shrugged. "Maybe it's shock. But we'll see what happens soon."

"Yeah."

"Have a good day, then." It was like I left a battlefield. All's quiet, all's calm.

Thank you everyone for the 3.8K reads! I really appreciate that people like to read my writing. That's the extent of my social life now. That, and rewriting Riemann sums and definite integrals.

Also, can anyone explain what rankings on Wattpad stories are based on tags?

Modern Problems

[image]

As soon as I sprinted down the walkway and away from sight, I was filled with irrational guilt. I shouldn't have taken such a little thing so seriously, but I did, and I suffer the consequences. I didn't look back, but instead trudged along to my college, away from people. I was glad Iceland was away doing something so I had the whole room to myself. I opened the balcony door and just sat down on the cold floor. I couldn't even think about anything else but what I did. I desperately wanted to go and find Japan and ask for forgiveness, but every time I vowed to stand up, my heart started to hammer in my chest, and I sat back down again, on the hard plastic flooring of the balcony. I felt my shoulders round and my posture slump and wanted to cry. Tears didn't come, but my back did start to hurt. I took out my phone and dialed my father's number. I knew that he might be still working, but I didn't know who else to confide in. After a long pause, he picked up and the sound of grinding machines in the back filled my ears.

"Hello?" He said gruffly. "Talk to me." I dialled his work phone. It didn't have a caller identification.

"Hi papa." I heard my voice become an octave higher. "I kind of need to talk to you."

The sound of machines faded out. "I am listening." It didn't sound like he was in the mood to talk.

"Um...I need advice."

"Ugh, advice." I heard a lighter click. He must be smoking. "About what? Academics?"

"No..." I sighed.

"Dont evade then," he said. "Tell me."

"I-I've just had a...I made a mistake. With one of my friends."

A pause. "Hmm, and so?"

"A-and, I kind of...well...didn't do the correct thing...and I feel guilty about it."

"Ah, Russia. Is there nothing else in the world you have to worry about?" He pleaded. "This sounds frivolous enough. Just say sorry. You don't necessarily have to be, but people love it. I do it all the time. It works."

"But..."

"Russia. Listen to me." He growled into the receiver. "I tell you one thing: friends are like gloves. You need them sometimes, sometimes you do not. If you lose them, you can always get more. Some stay, some get lost. It's their problem. Not yours."

"I...you're right, I guess." I said, defeated.

"I'm not saying this to make you feel bad, Russia. It's just you must not hurt yourself just because others are so sensitive. Who is going to live with you for the rest of your life? Only you. Nobody else. Not even me. Just you. Understand?"

"Yes."

"So don't run yourself in a corner." He continued. "If you have that much trouble, talk to Dr. Austria. It is his job to help you, after all. Okay?" His voice softened at the end. No matter how annoyed he was, he would always help me with anything.

"Alright." I made my voice even once more.

"Good. Call me again if anything." He ended the call rather quickly. I sighed in longing. Sometimes I felt that my father never understood what I was going through. His problems were centred around hunger, cold and not enough money. Mine were different, and could be called laughable against my father's. I considered them serious and would rather be faced with anything but my own problems. Deciding that I would rather not see or apologise to

anyone, I put on my dark greenish grey coat with the fur trim and set out, almost like a sniper, to Dr. Austria's office. It is very hard to sneak around if you are one of the tallest people on campus, I had to admit. In about three seconds, fifteen people said 'hi' to me and three waved. Slovakia even paused to chat about the homework we were given in class. I pulled the hood over my head, even though I was roasting alive. For February, the sun was blazing and the air became almost still. Lucky me. Panting, I made my way to the small and familiar half cottage, half office like small one story building. Switzerland, the snobbish but also uncannily organised teenager was sitting at the front desk, manning three monitors but scrolling though his phone. He had in, of course, the latest model of earphones and the most up to date phone and the trendiest watch, but apparently his father had picked out his wardrobe, by the looks of his blazer and bowtie. He looked up at me as I closed the front door. It had a bell attached to it. I vowed to not agitate the bell the next time I came. Putting on a fake smile I approached him and asked for Dr. Austria.

"Sure." He said in a bored tone. "Just wait a minute." He stood up and went into the room right in back of him, yelling in German at his father. I didn't expect much, but if I had used that kind of time towards my father, mind you grass would grow greener. That is, I'd be fertilizer. Dead. Switzerland came back with a harassed look on his face, muttering to himself. "He's coming." He announced to me, sitting back down. I wondered if he went to school or not. Judging by the fact that he had stacks of school textbooks on the desk as well as documents and secretarial papers, he might've been home schooled. Or on virtual. Either way, not in a physical building with peers. Dr. Austria came down, glaring at Switzerland the whole time. The latter acted as though he didn't care.

"Next time," he seethed. "I don't want to hear such words coming out of your mouth."

"Whatever...dad." Switzerland sighed, twiddling with his pen. "I isn't sign up for this job. You're not even paying me."

"In a way, I am." The whole conversation was going on in German. Apparently, Dr. Austria thought that only his family spoke the language. "I am saving us from hiring a secretary. Do you know

how much they want nowadays? Too much."

"Okay, okay."

"Now sit down, be quiet and do your schoolwork. I've had enough of your teachers calling me in the middle of my bath." He turned back to me and his rage melted into pleased surprise. I had to squash down a smile that was forming on my lips. "Hello Russia." He reverted back to English.

"Good afternoon." I said back.

"Come," he led me into the pink room once more, shooting a glare at Switzerland for the last time and slamming the door. A bit too forcefully. "Oh, my apologies. I did not mean that."

"It's fine." I nodded to hide the smile that I couldn't suppress.

"So," he sat opposite of me, smoothing out the folds of his cotton white polo shirt. "What can I help you with?" He folded his hand in his lap and waited.

"Well, I came to just....talk. I have a small issue." I stammered.

Dr. Austria's reaction was very different than my father's. "Oh, is it related to academics? Or is it social or emotional?"

"Emotional." I sighed.

"Ah, I see." I noticed that after the time I said that clipboards irritated me, I've never seen one in his hands when he talked with me. The whole picture of recording my thoughts on paper vexed me, and I frequently voiced the issue. But Dr. Austria was considerate enough and was attentive. As my father said, it was his *job*. As I heard from snippets of conversation, he was supposedly like my father on campus, and I was told to say the truth to him. It was an arrangement between my father, school psychologist, headmaster, and Dr. Austria.

"It's a bit childish," I admitted.

"Usually these kinds of problems seem so, but they are actually not.

Especially for people who have a hard time dealing and figuring out their emotions." His tone was lightly patronizing, but that was how I was spoken to for most of my life. He also spoke in a very 'step around' manner that I wasn't used to till I came here. I've noticed that people try to rather make their clients and students feel comfortable rather than roughly extract the problem and be done with it. I don't know which method I liked. Quick and painful, or long winded and awkward.

"Well. I sort of...yelled at someone for a really small thing. And now I'm guilty about it." I didn't want to say names or situations, so I spoke vaguely. I could see that he had gotten the general idea.

"And you can't bring yourself to apologise." He finished for me. I nodded. "It's not irrational, though. You do feel guilty. Did you feel anger rising up before the actual situation....happened?"

"Not really. I was calm, relaxed even." I recalled. "And then..." I realised that I couldn't go on without revealing the fat t I've been holding in for so long. I guess secrets can't forever remain. I will definitely regret this later on. "The topic reached my relationship....with someone. And I got protective." Even though an adult, I could see that he wanted to know who I liked, almost like a teasing child. Instead he decided to bite his lip and nod accordingly. "And then I yelled at one of my friends and thoroughly embarrassed myself." I finished. He looked back at me and nodded again. For a long moment, all he did was look at me, but never made eye contact for more than four seconds.

"Ah, I see now." He went back to folding his hands in his lap. "Well, I suggest that each time that happens, try to pause, think it though. It must sound strange, but if you do so, you'll find yourself in less of these situations....not that you'd want to be in one." He said hurriedly. "I'm very glad that you come to me, but do you have any peers that would also....sort of strengthen your social circle, so to speak?"

Moment of horrible truth. "Yes."

"One person or maybe more?"

"Eh, I don't know. My flatmate is my friend, but I don't confide in him very often. I just yelled at my other, so.....and my third friend would probably be the only person I could....plainly speaking, trust."

"That's definitely fine," he said. "May I ask whom?"

Alright, now was the moment of horrible deteriorating debilitating truth. "Germany." I tried to keep myself for stuttering. His posture showed no signs, and he didn't speak. I looked at his eyes to find a waterfall of emotions spilling, spiralling, and splashing out. He didn't look at me for a time, instead staring at everything but me. He repeatedly bit his lip, showing his perfectly smooth white teeth. Eventually, he settled back, tipped his head down and let out a long sigh. All that time I thought of just bolting straight out the door.

Then, as if he hadn't spent about five whole execrable minutes just silently moving his eyes, he spoke once more, evenly and serenely. The only fact that unnerved me was that he was staring though me, not at."Oh, very good. How nice. I know Germany. He is my nephew, in a way. But we are family, all that matters. Charming, though." He babbled on. Then, he stood up and went to drink some water from a dispenser near the door. Opening it just a creak, he started to talk in German to his son. "Switzerland,"

"Mmmm, ja?"

"You know Germany, right?" He spoke quickly and quietly, so it was a struggle to keep my head from turning their direction. I wanted to seem oblivious.

"Yes." The other said. "Honestly, he's pretty weird. Also, he's a huge nerd."

"I didn't ask for comments, did I?" Dr. Austria hissed back. "I said, do you know him?"

"Yes! I do!" Switzerland practically shouted. "So what?!"

"He's Russia's friend." He half hissed half whispered.

Switzerland's voice came out dripping with sarcasm. "Uhh, dad,

don't you think that your client knows his name in German? And Germany's? I wouldn't talk so freely."

"That's why I'm talking in German." He said, sipping the water from his cup. Apparently, he felt comfortable gossiping in front of me. Not that I cared. I already heard him chatter about other people. Though, it never left the office, so in a way, I trusted him to not spread rumours. Somehow.

"Whatever dad." Switzerland sighed. "I just don't like gossiping in front of somebody. Especially if they're the subject. Especially if their dad is a man who can break people's spines. Especially-,"

"Fine." His voice sounded a bit strained from anger. "I just wanted to say that. Nothing else! I don't need your intimidation warnings either." Again, he slammed the door. He turned to me, and walked back to his side of the circular shaped couch, sighing.

"Is everything alright?" I asked curiously, acting as though I didn't understand a word of their talk. In fact, the implicit meaning was even more interesting. I guess I didn't have the worst type of problems. People had worse. It made me feel much better than just talking to someone.

"Ah, yes." He snapped out of his trance. "I just told my son that he knows Germany." At least he told the truth. He wasn't as bad as sometimes he's described.

"Oh, okay." I made sure that my face showed more understanding than before. "I see."

"I was just surprised that I know him." He crossed one of his legs over the other. "Its a small world." He noted, uncrossing his legs after a moment. I also told him that I was particularly annoyed by that as well. He remembered that once he looked back at me. He had an excellent memory to what I found irritating. "Ah, but never mind. Anything else I can help with?"

"Um, not really." I murmured.

"Excellent." He said. "I'm not one to throw students out, so you may

stay or leave. Your choice." He ended his sentence and stood up. He left the door to the main lobby ajar, but made sure it shielded me from view. I wanted to stay and not go anywhere, but soon I was searching for something to do. I crept out of the office to tell Dr. Austria that I wanted to come back after I brought my homework. It made me sound like an antisocial anxiety ridden smart person, and Switzerland staring at me the whole time didn't help, but I was given a positive answer, and the rest didn't matter. I started to ignore people's reactions to my behaviour and comments; I didn't know if it was good or bad. I left my jacket in his office and pranced out of the building, light and vigilant. Not that I was light or vigilant. I was the opposite. I quickly ran, or skipped, up to my room, took my book and left. I almost got to the office without a problem. No, that would be too easy.

"Russia?" It was him. Germany. He was wearing different clothing, black flowing slacks, a black thin turtleneck, and a grey warm vest as well as a surprised expression.

"Definitely not Russia." I said quickly.

He folded his arms and smiled. "Really?"

"I'm going now." I was already almost at the door to the office.

"You know I'm not mad at you, right?" He made me stop, my hand hovering on the door handle.

"No, I didn't know." I turned around.

"I was trying to find you." He said. "But you wouldn't answer the phone."

"Sorry. I left it in there." I pointed to Dr. Austria's office. Germany raised his eyebrows.

"You know that somebody might read your messages?"

"Who?" I asked dryly.

"Switzerland. He's a bit of a nosy person." He noted. "He thinks that he's anonymous and low profile. I've seen him unlock his father's

phone and text in it. They don't have the best of relationships." He pointed out.

"I noticed." I muttered. "They like to talk behind people's backs."

"Ah, yes." He sighed. "That's Austria's fatal flaw. Hamartia, you could say. And he probably talked in German, right?" After I nodded he continued, laying his hands on my chest and looking up at me. "Yeah, but don't take it seriously. When it comes to gossip, he's just like my great uncle. It's usually harmless chatter." He seemed worried that I perceived his family member as a lie spreader. Fortunately, I didn't. I pet his head affectionately, and pressed him to my chest. He only came up to the end of my ribcage, but he nuzzled me all the same. I closed my eyes and breathed in the cold but sun warmed air. It was that air that also snapped me out of the trance I was in. My book slipped out of my grip of my right hand and hugged Germany tightly.

"I'm still going back to that office." I said.

"I know I can't change your mind about that." He broke the embrace. "But I also need to talk to my uncle. About family stuff." I didn't pester him about what, but I vaguely knew. "But most importantly, I found you."

"Yes. You did." I smiled.

Like Father, Like Son

[image]

I felt bad for Russia. I knew that he was guilty to what he did to Japan, but he couldn't fix the problem like a rusted out axle. Somebody's emotions weren't like tank engines or blueprints. They were complicated beyond differential equations and sigma notations. I peered inside the office lobby and saw Switzerland flipping though a Geography book, writing down notes. A small plate of salad and a bowl of soup stood on the high circular desk next to him, and looked untouched, save for the opened mayonnaise packet in the salad. He looked up at me and I waved to him. He waved back, only half heartedly and resumed to staring at his book.

"Hi Switzerland." I came up to him, greeting him more formally.

"Ja?"

"Could I talk to your dad? My uncle?"

"Sure." He said flatly. "Wait a second. DAD!!" He hollered. A creak and a growl told me that Austria heard his son. "He's coming." He went back to reading.

"Why are you yelling?" Austria came out, fuming.

"Germany is here." The other replied, pointing in my direction, simultaneously flipping though his book and phone and desktop computer.

"Oh, hello Germany!" Austria looked back at me, waving.

"Hallo Onkel," I said. "I wanted to come and ask you something."

"Of course." He smiled and signalled for me to follow. He stopped at the door to his pink walled room. "Oh, not here. Hmm, my storage or private office as you will." He led me to a little and cramped

room filled wall to wall with stack and rows and folders of papers. Binders, multicoloured tabs, sticky notes, stock cards and staples. It looked like a hopeless mess, and it seemed that someone had tried to organise the mass of paper in the room with different cabinets and bookcases, but alas, no avail. In the middle of the small coop like room with the windows obscured by grounded up tree-stuff, stood a pathetic plastic desk, ones that you see at yard and food sales. A flat gunmetal grey fold-up chair stood next to it, also having a huge binder on it. He rummaged around and found another fold up chair for me to sit on. "Sorry for the atrocious and ghastly look of the room. It is storage, after all."

"It's fine." I was a little fidgety. The small clearing of the room with its small bare bulb unnerved me, and it was the kind of office style my own father had. Cramped, dark, secretive. Isolated, shifty, eerily quiet. Elusive, back end, designed to make you sweat. Austria swept away a bunch of folders on the floor, which clattered down in a flurry of paper, and put his arms on the desk. His silver watch clacked against the plastic desk like a dull thump. He gave me a tired smile.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"Onkel...did you ever....feel like you were judged by your father's actions?"

He looked at me in full understanding. "You think you are? In truth, yes, I was. As you may have known, your grandfather and my father disappeared after the great war, swept off the face of the globe. What you may haven't known is that they came back. Only a few years ago, I found that they camped out in the Himalayan region, anonymous and unidentified." He paused for a moment, wiped his brow and continued. "I personally was definitely scrutinized and watched. Hungary....is another story. He fit back into society fine, as you see. He's only my half brother, really." He went on a different topic altogether. I let him go on for a bit. I was already told, so there wasn't a big shock. But I guessed to Austria, when he heard the news, was appalled beyond belief. "Are you being targeted, or something? I can always tell Britain. He should deal with this kind of issue. It's not appropriate to point out others' pasts, so much after the 'forgive and forget' speeches had been

spread. especially in such a liberal school."

"It's not direct," I lied. The glares and whispers I was still getting were very direct, but I wasn't given outward threats. "It's always implicit. Nobody ever is direct. Some are afraid; others angry."

"Ah, how unfortunate. I would-," he was interrupted by a ring. His phone. Looking at the caller identification he picked up immediately. "Sorry, it is my father....hallo?" He placed his phone to his ear.

"Austria." I heard the high pitched whiny voice of my great uncle. Even though not on speaker, I could still hear his voice though the receiver.

"Yes papa?" Austria's own voice became almost like child's.

"Austria, you must come here." He said.

"Here, where?"

"To the front of your office. I'm here."

"WHAT?" He yelled in shock. My whole head felt like it was going to crack and I clapped my hands over my ears. The sound bounced and echoed in my skull. "Why? and How!?"

"For the thing." Austria Hungary whined. "You told me about....and I'm visiting German Empire. He's going to give me tea packets."

"Ah, papa." Austria sighed. "I'm in the middle of something important."

"But I'm your father," he kept on. It sounded like Austria was older than him. More sensible and serious. "Who can be more important than me?"

"I'm sorry Germany," he whispered to me. "We're going to have to cut this short. Maybe next time?"

"Of course." I nodded. "I understand...I guess."

"Danke." He kept on to talk with Austria Hungary.

"Hurry up." Was the last line I heard before Austria stood up. "I'm freezing."

"It's not even cold." He muttered and left noisily. Pushing the chair out of the way, I dutifully followed, blinking and adjusting to the brightness after the cramped and dark room. Switzerland had ducked under his desk out of sight, tightly curled in a ball and unmoving, with his mouth open in panting. My great uncle, Austria Hungary, in all his royal highness, stood near the doorway one of his arms wrapped around his son's. His unimaginably beautiful white waistcoat with golden epalettes and strings and embroidery reminded me of Russian Empire's navy clothing. Born with a horrific distortion of the eyes due to my great grandfather's love of alcohol, he wore his two signature eyepatches over his eye cavities. Guilty for doing so, my great grandfather left all of his money to Austria Hungary instead of his able bodied, belligerent, and fiery younger son. His chin was always tipped up and his expression always sour. He always contracted some sort of passing by sniffle or sickness, leaving him wheezing and winded. Self conscious as he was, he asked everyone about his appearance. He ran numerous talk shows and broadcasted his voice over ever radio and his face graced the newspapers, televisions and mobile phones alike. Even if he couldn't see himself, he did have a huge ego. I guessed that being the way he was didn't really help being humble; great grandfather spoiled him too much. It showed, unfortunately. He had an uncanny ability to sense how many people were in a room and how big spaces were. His head snapped towards me. I involuntarily held my breath.

"Who is there?" Austria Hungary clutched his son's arm like a housewife to her rich husband.

"It's Germany. Drittes Reich's son. Remember him?" Austria said calmly, rubbing his frail father on the back. Even though old, Austria Hungary stood stiff as a board, his back straight like a soldier's.

"Yes. I do." He nodded. "Hello Germany. I don't think we've met...at all."

"No, great uncle."

"Come here." He waved in the completely correct direction. He must have sharp hearing to be able to distinguish which part of the room I was in. I hesitantly came to him and he reached out with a trembling hand and brushed my neck. I think he was going for my shoulder, but I didn't expect perfection. I took his hand gently and guided it to my shoulder.

"Exactly like Reich." He murmured. He tipped his head higher, which was a bit awkward. It was like he was staring at the ceiling. He then, well, he can't look, but it felt like he was boring into my soul. "Helpful and passionate. Not always nice, but gentle. You have your father's handhold." I slightly frowned. I didn't need more notices on how I was like my dad. "I might not see you, but I sense that you changed your mood." He smiled a little, showing his pearly teeth. "Don't worry. I'm not like your grandfather. I'm not oblivious to modern news. I know." He didn't let me take my hand out of his grip. His hands were smooth and never felt what manual labour was. The way he smiled and how it showed his small pink gums, and the way he slightly cocked his head towards Austria was weird. All I wanted was for him to take his small and delicate soft hand that was becoming cold in mine. He was probably suffering from anaemia or poor circulation, since his hands were turning icy. "I know."

"Papa, let's not make Germany feel uncomfy." Austria said quietly. "What did you want me to see, again?"

Austria Hungary reverted back to his annoying tone. "As always, forgetting. That book! That book you printed for me. With the braille?"

"Oh, yes." He nodded. "Wait here. I'll get it."

"I'll come with."

"No. Here, take Germany's arm." He led his father towards me. Without my say so, my great uncle was trapped to me and nothing I could do about it. Austria disappeared into the pink room. And I was left with the clingy emperor in my midst. Fortunately, he didn't

talk to me, instead he hummed to himself quietly. He was a little taller than me, but shorter than the average person. The way it seemed that he was looking at me was making me sweat, and I thought of how lucky Switzerland must be, hiding like a coward under his table. This was *his grandfather*. He should have more respect and sense of duty. Austria emerged from the room quickly with a thick book. His father was eagerly awaiting for him, one arm stretched out in front of him in uncertainty, the other still around me. Once he had the book in his hand however, he let go, brushing the book cover over and over.

"I loved this story." He sniffed.

"That's why I printed it out." Austria said. "I knew you'd want to read it yourself." His father was running his fingers along the first page of the book, and I could see little raised bumps in the pages. It was a code called braille, one that the blind frequently used to read. "I need to ask exactly how you came here without anyone's help."

"Hungary helped me," he said, still running his fingers over the pages. It was kind of weird the way he was looking straight ahead and flipping though the book at the same time. "He arranged a train, met me at the station there, went with me, and drove me here. He even guided me to your door."

"And then what?"

"He left. He has other responsibilities as well." Austria Hungary shut the book and shrugged. "So I was left here."

"How did you...never mind."

"Smartphones are made to be smart." He pointed out. "I can just ask to call your number. You don't have to be savvy or able to see to man one." The other said, as if reading his son's mind. "Anyway, I need to get to German Empire. Can you lead me?"

Austria's expression looked like he was ready to jump off mount Everest rather than lead his father across campus. "Er, I have work to...do. Yes. A lot. Germany can."

"No. Germany has done enough. He doesn't even know who I am." His father countered. I had just a sliver more respect for him after he said that. "Where's Switzerland? He is my grandchild, after all." I heard a scrambling from where Switzerland was hiding. He probably heard everything. Unfortunately, so did Austria Hungary, who's hearing was even sharper. His head slowly turned towards the noise.

"Switzerland? Are you hiding?"

"No grandpa. I'm working." He came out.

"Liar." Austria Hungary suddenly hissed out. "All of you. Do you think I don't know what you say? Or what faces you make behind me or in front? Because I do know. And you will stop lying to me now. Understand me, or should I use sign language?" I was actually scared. With him next to me, he seemed to swell twice his size and the fact that he was blind didn't really assure you if you were in the other side of his rage.

"I understand." Switzerland's voice came out like a peep. He sounded like a little two week old chick. "I'm sorry, grandpa."

"You better be," he seethed. "Come here." Switzerland came uncertainty, and his grandfather seized his wrist very tightly as he came. I could see the that how he gripped was painful. Weak and sickly as he was, he knew how to grasp between the ending of the radius and ulna, and the beginnings of the proximal row of bones, the scaphoid and triquetrum bones. It would grind against the lunate bone and cause intense flashes of pain. It was a hard technique, surprising and perfect for someone like him. He let go, and Switzerland rubbed the carpal bones of his wrist.

"What was that for?" He cried out.

"Your misbehaviour. For ten times now." He took the crook of his arm and tugged it a bit. "Now you can lead me to you great uncle's."

"Okay." Switzerland started to go slowly, much to the disappointment and disapproving of his grandfather.

"I'm not that bad! Go faster!" He whined and slammed the door behind him. What a nice family. Austria sighed and left to his storage room and I was again, alone in the minimalistic white lobby. I peered into the pink room and saw Russia still there, still reading his book as if nothing happened. He was facing away from me, and had his grey ushanka on the low table next to him. Along with that hat were a black binder, a graphing calculator, a bunch of pens and a packet of sticky notes. I came in and closed the door. He turned to me as soon as I entered.

"Oh, hello Germany," he waved to me.

"Hi," I crossed over to the other side of the couch. He looked pretty comfortable, and was writing on notes, sticking them into his book at times. He seemed unfazed and unaware of the whole scene that unravelled behind him. "Did....did you realise what happened back there?" I pointed to the lobby.

He made a serene face and a calm smile. "No." He shook his head. I probably looked shocked, and he laughed warmly. "Haha! Your face! Hah, I'm just kidding. I'm not deaf. I heard the whole thing. Your great uncle seems very much like a whiny child. Till the end, of course. Then I changed my perspective." He snapped his book shut and took the binder, pens and notes from the desk. Folding it neatly into his bag he sat down next to me. "Did you get to ask you question?"

"Austria became busy." I sighed. "He stopped right before he was about to say it." I buried my face in my hands after I set my glasses on the glass coffee table.

"I'm sure that you'll be able to next time." He said. "He can't evade forever."

"That's the problem! He's not evading, he's always busy!"

"Maybe you should schedule an appointment with him?"

"Why?"

"He'll have no choice. He will have to talk." He laughed. "I mean, I

can't say, he's not my family. But you should be able to talk one on one."

"It's just...that image un the river scared me so much. It wouldn't have shaken me if I didn't see you as your dad as well." I shuddered. He lay an arm around me and pressed me closer.

"Why are you so worried, again?" He whispered. "A reflection in a creek? A trick of light and conscious? Should a small picture faze you and leave you to be alone with all your problems? Sure I may have stupid complications, but believing in that the past dictates the future? That is a wrong idea. Haven't I told you not to worry anymore?"

"Haven't I told you not to either?" I looked up at him. His sparkling lavender eyes showed that he was genuinely worried for me, and they were darkened from apprehensions. They always were. I decided that I shouldn't worry him over trivial things. I hugged him back, my ear pressed to his chest. I could feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, slow and controlled. I thought I could fall asleep - he had an ability to make me calm even when I was scared beyond wits.

"Ah, Germany. But it's so hard." He said.

"You think it's easy for me?" I murmured.

He started to pet my head gently. "You're smarter than anyone else I know. I think you're smarter than most of the staffers. You are just...kept back."

"Mm." I mumbled into him. I was drifting off. "I guess. But I still have good marks."

"I don't want to sound patronising, but you're definitely not applying yourself,"

"When people hiss at you, you wouldn't either,"

"I would deal with them in three seconds. Would call them to fight." He said proudly. "I was shown how to fight with an without a knife."

"See, I can't fight," I responded, circling my arms around his neck. My hands brushed the leather chain with his crucifix. "I'm not that type of person. Doesn't matter if I have an automatic rifle. I wouldn't be able to shoot it."

"But you can't let people stomp all over you," he growled protectively. "If you can't, I will."

"That's nice of you," I smiled. He kissed the top of my head in response.

Comparing Life to Noodles

[image]

Why did I even do this?! I ran away from my brothers and knew that neither North nor South would follow me. As I scampered down the walkway, I brushed away tears that ran out of my eyes like waterfalls. I knew that this idea was horrible! Nobody ever listened to me! I tripped three times and scrambled over a bunch of hedgerows. I didn't know where I was going, but my mind didn't want to go and be alone. I couldn't go anywhere and I felt lost. Sad. Unimaginably hurt. I wasn't mad at Russia at all. I assumed that he must be feeling very guilty now. I couldn't tell him that I didn't find him at fault. It was myself I was mad at. For telling everyone everything. I didn't know where to go even. My mind eventually led my feet to the gate of my brother's, Vietnam, college. I found that the door to his college was open, in luck and I cried a river of tears up the steps. I hesitantly knocked on his door.

"Hello?" A stocky man came out. Not Vietnam. His roommate. "You have the wrong room, girl." then he noticed. "Are you crying?" He looked a little embarrassed for being gruff.

"Bulgaria," a low voice came. "It's my sister."

"Oh," Bulgaria looked taken aback. "Oh, Japan, right? Ooh, sorry. I didn't know....eh, I should probably go, anyway." He went past me and down the hall. Vietnam looked down at me with his ever stern face and serious gaze, shielded by his rectangular glasses. He gently but firmly tugged me inside his room and into his light kitchen with windows facing west. A large cut watermelon sat right in the middle of the petite table, and a black bowl full of steaming hot Phở tái was on the counter. He picked the bowl up and started to eat with a pair of chopsticks. He looked at me, whom probably seemed pathetic next to him. He was still wearing his western style clothing, the white dress shirt and tight vest, common amongst the western European upper class. I would have though he would swap them for freer and more comfortable clothing by this time.

"So what's wrong?" He asked.

"What's wrong? Everything!" I nearly shouted. He didn't seem fazed at all.

"Like what?"

"Like my friend just yelled at me!" He adjusted his glasses, and kept on eating.

"Hmm, why didn't you yell back?"

"Uh, because it's not his fault! It's mine." I felt like digging a huge hole and sitting in it forever so that everyone would forget about me. Vietnam looked at me for a moment with his deep and knowing eyes and then away at the sky outside that was slowly becoming darker.

He went back to eating. Ugh. "Well, then. You should take responsibility for your faults." His indifference made me weak on my feet. I couldn't take it.

"Vietnam!" I cried, falling on the floor. He was unattached, but he wasn't cold. He set his bowl down and knelt next to me, rubbing my back and whispering to me comfortingly. I crawled into his tight embrace and sniffed.

"Japan...don't be so hard on yourself..." he whispered. "Where are North and South?"

"Vietnam, they were there when this all happened." I sobbed. "I'm so embarrassed and so scared. I just couldn't stay."

"It's okay," he picked me up and strolled out of the kitchen with me in one and his bowl in the other masterfully. "At least you came to me." I actually trusted Vietnam much more than my brothers, since he was older, more experienced, and I kind of shared a room with him most of my life. We went out on the balcony to watch the sun set. He set me down on a chair that had a red wool blanket on it and he leaned on the railing of the balcony, eating. "But I would like an explanation as to what happened."

"Alright." I sniffed again. "So I found out that...two of my friends were...in a sort of relationship. One of them is a very secretive person who doesn't like his personal life shown. So then, of course, I didn't want all of this to be a large secret and I stupidly told South and North. They said they wanted to meet them and then North told them something about relationships and he just..." I mumbled quickly and broke down in tears again.

"Who is this friend of yours?" Vietnam asked, interested slightly.

"His name is Russia."

"Russia?" He said in disbelief. "Russia? Tall guy with a grey hat?"

"Yes." i said, mildly surprised as well.

"Unbelievable. He's not the type I'd see yelling. More like subtly threatening."

"He has a short fuse," I sighed. "He can get defensive and angry easily."

"Hmm, I see. But I know him. What a small world. My classmate is my sister's friend."

"You don't need to rub it in," I hiccuped, which is what usually happens after you cry really hard. Once you stop, there is a period of quick short gasps that come out as well.

"So Russia became angry, hard to believe, he's very calm in my class...but whatever, and he yelled at you, right?"

"Yeah," I wiped my tears off with my sweater. When he saw that, he offered a handkerchief.

"Ah, Japan. What can I say. From my point of view, all of this sounds so childish and petty squabble. I'm sure that he'll come and say sorry to you sometime tomorrow." That was exactly I didn't want. A showdown in the *middle* of a class.

An idea flew into my head. "Hey, which class is Russia in with you?"

"Mm, German." He said.

"Do you have it tomorrow?" When he nodded I continued to babble on my train of thought. "Maybe...maybe you can tell him that I'm sorry? Please? So that I wouldn't need to explain?" He shook his head in a negative response. "Please Vietnam? It really important."

"Japan. I don't need to involve myself into others' problems. I'm not to do that." He said calmly, adjusting his glasses once more.

"Please?" I whispered. "Vietnam. You're my favourite brother in the world. Maybe even favourite person. Who will help me if not you?"

A long pause. And then came the sigh. I knew he'd do it. "Fine. But just this once. Got it? No more favours."

"Got it." I beamed. It seemed to work, because he just shook his head and smiled back.

"Did baba ever tell you about the comparisons between life and noodles?" He asked, calling our father, China, by the affectionate name for dad in Chinese. When I didn't respond, he just went on. "Well, friends are like noodles. Some stretch for a long time; others are shorter. Those are spans of life that you spend with each person. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. Either way, you don't have to worry, because even if important, you are more important to yourself than anyone else. Right?"

"Yeah," I agreed.

"So sometimes we have to admit that friendships can't work out." He sighed. "For example, I recall being friends with this girl named Venezuela. She was nice, we shared same ideas, thoughts, hobbies, and everything. But then we sort of drifted apart and I could see that there was no way to save the relationship. We fought over trivial things and argued over chicken bones. Then, one day I told her that maybe we should try to start over...in a new life. She agreed and we peacefully forgave each other and left, guilt and shadow free. It was very enlightening. I don't have to feel guilty about what I said to her and don't have to watch my back in case I think she's planning revenge. Always part on good terms."

"It's like you want me to stop being friends with Russia." I whined.

"No. I'm just saying, if you feel pressured, you don't have to stay friends."

"Okay. I'll see."

"That's all I ask." He was about to leave when the bowl he had in his hand slipped and fell to the ground. A huge crash down below signified that the bowl reached the end of its operational life. "Shhhhhhh...." he wanted to swear, I could see, but instead looked down where his bowl fell down over the edge.

"WHO IN THE WHOLE *STUPID* WORLD THREW THAT BOWL?" Someone screamed down below. It sounded female, but I couldn't tell. Vietnam, remaining cool as an icy lake, peered over the edge.

"I did," He called down. "Sorry!"

"Why did you throw it?!"

"I didn't, it just fell out of my hands," He explained sheepishly. If I were him, I would have ducked out of sight and never even talk to that person below. But Vietnam was much more brave and calm than me. "Should I call someone?"

"Why don't you clean it yourself? You're the one who dropped it," The voice said below, not that angry as it sounded before.

"Hey, that sound like a great idea," He gave the person below a thumbs up. "In exchange for your silence over the incident?"

"Deal, now come,"

"Who was that?" I questioned while Vietnam started to pack some stuff up.

"Israel," he said. "Some fourth year girl at this college. She's an okay girl. Not my friend, but maybe acquaintance. Certainty not a stranger," He threw open the door and sprinted down the hall. I was left on his balcony. Snuggling in the warm blanket that was starting to get a little itchy, I looked down to see a girl in a stylish tan

trench coat with her hands on her hips, standing right next to the shattered bowl. I thought I shouldn't intervene or mope around my older brother, so I quickly folded up the woollen blanket, closed the door lightly, and skipped out. Down at the bottom stood Israel, who was watching Vietnam clear the tiny little pieces of glass and ceramic, Bulgaria, who was trying hard not to laugh, and a medium height, thin and fidgety guy who was watching with pity and wanting to help. It was almost a crowd. Israel turned to me, her brown eyes flashing.

"Hey, came to watch the primer glass picking show?" Her voice was sharp and almost barking. It was lower than an average female voice, and it made her look intimidating. She waved towards Vietnam dramatically.

"That's Vietnam's sister." Bulgaria told her. "Don't go picking on her like you do to all first years."

"I do not pick on first years," she raised her eyebrows. "I merely state the truth."

The fidgety man facepalmed and Bulgaria sighed. "Seriously?"

"Yep. Nothing is a lie,"

"Yes, especially the one where you told everyone this used to be a protest quenching ground for students designed specifically in the neo gothic way to suck out your soul and leave you a propaganda believing, establishment loving worm?" Bulgaria said innocently. In return, he got a nod from Israel.

"Okay, I didn't put it exactly that way, but great explanation. I'll try to use it next time," she beamed.

"May you all please refrain from your sickening conversations in front of my sister and resume to your ghastly talk later?" Vietnam finished his job and looked around for a waste receptacle.

"Listen Vietnam, first years aren't innocent children," Israel waved him off. "They have their own type of trash talk. Even worse than ours."

"You can say that again," the other man agreed.

"See? Poland agrees!"

"That's because he's your boyfriend," Bulgaria smiled mischievously. Israel gasped and Poland cowered away. "He'll agree with everything you say."

"NO," She said, very unconvincing.

"I don't agree with her on everything," Poland protested.

"Riiiiight," Vietnam grinned. "I'll definitely believe that,"

"Ugh, you are the worst."

"Mmm, seems like someone doesn't mind," Vietnam teased. Poland half smiled, but didn't engage in the heated conversation, unlike Israel. He preferred to bite his lip instead, watching the sunset that illuminated the gothic buildings.

"Anyway!" Israel finished off her speech. "I have to go to my dorm now. I need to finish stupid seminar work."

"What do you do there?"

"Basket weaving. And hand holding." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "So lovely. My basket looks like it can't even have apples in them. All of them would fall out." She sighed. "Oh, Poland, don't forget, professor France wants us to come and practice for the thing tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" He shook his head. "I have other priorities."

"She doesn't care. So don't forget." She shrugged back. "bye everyone. You have given me my daily dose of entertainment for tonight."

"Bye, have fun," they waved to her as she disappeared up the steps.

"I....should probably go as well....my flatmate wanted me to do something." Poland said nervously. "He's a little pushy."

"Who?"

"His name is America, but he wasn't supposed to be. My own room sort of....caught fire."

"Why?"

"I....definitely didn't set off a model rocket and it definitely didn't blow up at all. And then I didn't cry over my ruined final year project. And everything definitely wasn't a huge disaster." He nodded.

"Ah, I see. Well, have fun too, then." As he left, I thought I should've departed too and quickly thanked Vietnam for talking with me. Soon it would be dark, so I went to Redwood college with haste. I was about to almost go into the courtyard, all calm and ready for tomorrow. Everything was set. Vietnam would talk with Russia. Then I could tell him I was sorry. Everything would be perfect. Haha, I thought. I was so close to the gate when I heard a familiar voice. That small accent. That strained note of worry. Those precisely chosen words. Oh, why?

"Japan! I must talk with you," Russia was there calling to me. Nobody was with him, and he was running toward me. Terrified that I might mess everything up, I slammed the gate in his face and rushed away. I didn't want to talk to him before Vietnam did. Everything would be alright. I knew it. It would blow over tomorrow.

The Theatre, The Heart, and The Banned Book

[image]

How strange. I walked away from my German class, confusion in my head. Normally, Slovenia, and Vietnam and I would sit down quietly and get to work. Without small talk. Maybe Slovenia would ask us what we were going to do after classes, but we would answer curtly and politely back, and then focus on our class. This time, I was waiting around till Slovenia and Vietnam would come, and inconsistently giving advice to Herr German Empire if he needed help on his computer. I was doing horribly in English, but that was expected. I never wrote a twenty page essay before. I didn't even know what we were supposed to write about; Mr. UK kept telling me it was about whatever I choose. I didn't understand that concept very well. I've never chosen anything by myself. Not even essay topics. Slovenia came in and said hi, and then quieted down to read her book. Vietnam strolled into the classroom, and before anyone could speak, he turned to me.

"Hey, I need to tell you something," he said. I was mildly surprised at his willingness to talk.

"I'm all ears," I replied passively.

"You know, Japan wanted to say sorry." He told me, quickly.

"For what?" I already knew for what.

"Something involving you. And someone else. She didn't specify. She didn't want you to be too angry when she told you. That's all. Es tut mir Leid, Herr." He apologised to our professor, who seemed not too worried about the interruption and just started the lesson without further ado. Leaving me thinking about what Vietnam said. He didn't look like he actually knew what was going on, and was probably set up by Japan. Typical. I still was a bit stunned by the fact that Japan asked for forgiveness. then again, she did open her

mouth when I asked not too. In a way, her actions caused mine. Well, you shouldn't ponder on the past for too long; it's hazardous to do so. I was taught that pondering, regretting, and trusting were the big three dangers. And, I had to say, I didn't *have* engineering class today. I had *Biology*. Japan must've forgotten, but whatever. After our fast paced class on spontaneous and informal dialogues and three minute presentations, I left to my next class. Oh, yes. Drama. I went down to find myself the second person there. Poland was also there, openly staring at me without remorse. In his hands was his phone and on the stage which he was sitting was a plastic bottle with iced tea. It was obvious that the bottle was reused over, since it read 'Pepsi®' on it in faded letters and was peeling. He was pretending to look around the huge auditorium and consciously fiddling with his shirt collar and tan loafer laces all while keeping one eye on me. As if I didn't notice. At one time, when it was very obvious to the point that I felt agitated.

I wanted to tell him, 'Hey, why are you avoiding eye contact', what came out was: "Hi," In such a timid and scared tone that it made my own ears curl. Why did I sound so dumb? He looked at me tentatively and responded in the same tone I did.

"Um, hi," he responded, smiling a little.

"Are you in...fourth year?" I asked. I had to mentally slap myself. I must've looked stupid; of course he was in fourth year. He told us already.

"Yeah, it's been...interesting." He said, obviously ignoring the fact that he already mentioned it. "I guess."

"Is it better than every other one?"

"Mmm, no. I liked my third year best. I took courses I was interested in, and other was no final year projects or seminar." He nodded. "Um, but Cedar College..... is, uh, nice...and kind of loud."

"Mm, okay," I shut the conversation down. It was starting to get boring. Soon enough came the rest of our class. Professor France, today in a wide brimmed black hat, wine coloured frilly skirt, and a white blouse with shortened sleeves and a V-neck, came leaping out

from backstage. I wondered how she could run around full time in such high heels. As always, she had on pink lipstick and charcoal black mascara, but accompanied this time by purple and deep pink accents around the eyes. She looked around our bored group with excitement.

"Hello everyone! How was your day so far?" A few mutters of 'good', 'okay' and 'downright awful' came from our crowd. "Ready to make the day even better? Because I have a surprise for us today!" Did we look like we were jumping for joy? Not exactly. Qatar stifled a yawn, Poland looked at the ceiling and Israel picked her nails. Definitely not excited.

"What is it then?" I asked.

She positively beamed. "T shirts!" She produced a short sleeve shirt with our play's name written on it. It wasn't a bad shirt. It was pretty professional looking. It's just nobody can get excited over an article of clothing sewn together made from cotton, polyester and a bunch of cancer causing chemicals. Then again, this was Professor France...she loved everything. Well, at least inanimate objects. She passed them out to us, almost like party favours.

"Yay," Poland said, clapping his hands.

"Yay," Israel followed suit with her salty tone, but didn't show much emotion to being given the black shirt. She meticulously looked it over and then folded it in her lap.

"Who's ready to practice?" Professor France looked around at us expectantly. I raised my hand slowly and Poland did so after, a little sheepishly. Qatar and the others followed soon after, ranging from hopeful to placid to 'do I have to do this?'. "Great! Did everyone remember the time were meeting for today? If not, it's at sixteen thirty, back here." She clapped her hands. "Now then, let's get started. Act one, scene three. The casino." And so it went. Since I had the lead role, I did much of the work. The Queen was Israel, and she played her role well. She already had the distinct vindictive personality the Queen of Spades herself had. All in all, we did most of the speaking lines, preferring to do the singing during our time with the whole cast. Mostly our class had leading roles, which was

good, since we seldom had to dance. Mostly. Somewhat. I did have a part which was incorporated by professor France to make the play more interesting. It was a waltz between Hermann, the main character, and the Queen. Brilliant. Dancing with Israel was something I considered not fun. Apparently, she did too. But we didn't get to that part yet. It was all for the future. The time went by quickly, and soon we were all to leave. I left with the others, all leaving for our separate classes. I had one more hour of digging around insides to look forward to. Biology with my over excited lab partner. Great. Our teacher, Professor Spain, was a tough, snappy and fast talking man with a short wick and a fierce determination for protecting what he felt was right. Once a famous athlete, he resigned because of an injury to focus on biology, ironically. He had a taste for gold necklaces, leather jackets, and men's cologne. The smell of it would waft though the whole room and it was nauseating to be next to him. As I had dreaded, we came in to see an array of blue plastic bags with purple on the bottom. An assortment of sharp probing tools and pencils awaited us to use them on whatever disgusting things were in the blue bags. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my partner, her own eyes gleaming with barely contained excitement. I wondered if she was sane. Probably not. Last time I had tried to put my dry sarcasm away, but she was too perky, too irritating and too excited for me to handle.

"Buenos días mis queridos estudiantes!" Professor Spain came out of the back room, holding in one hand his leather jacket in the other a cardboard box. I didn't know much Spanish, but he always said that phrase, so I knew it meant 'good day my dear students'. Unlike professor France's class, we jumped right into our lesson. "Today I was able to get fascinating pieces of rabbit hearts. One for each group. It was a hassle, but I managed." To be honest, I wish he had some roadblocks. Biology without having to dig your hands into meat was bad enough. Too much layering, too many subjects. Biology was layered over Chemistry, which went over Physics, which went over Mathematics. You needed the lower layer to understand the higher one. Almost like a cake. You can't make the top layer without the base. I let my partner have the honours of dissecting, and took on the job to write down our 'findings'. After some time, which went slower than I ever imagined, we finished to

my delight and disappointment of my partner. I stripped off my gloves, said a hastily good bye to her, washed my hands off and left. I didn't want to engage in further conversation or stay behind to discuss the sinusoidal node or the carotid valve closures. they were talking of watching a beating heart and almost caught me to ask for advice on the subject. I think I would throw up if I saw a pulsing heart. Looking at a cold and empty heart was bad enough. I had some free time to do whatever I needed, give or take two hours, till I had to meet up with the rest of my unenthusiastic class and theatre obsessed club of professor France. I went back to my college to find Iceland gnawing on an eraser. He was accompanied by two bottles of orange juice and a muffin.

"Hi Iceland," I greeted him.

"Hello." He said back. "Do you know what logarithms are? I am so confused."

"They are exponential inverses." I explained quickly. "Basically the answer to the logarithm is your exponent. Logarithm four with base of two equals two. Right?"

"Uhhh," he looked over his paper. "Uhhh, yeah. Right. Yeah, you're right." He scribbled on his paper. "Can you check this?" I scanned over his answer to find only one correct. He sighed in defeat when I told him.

"I'm never going to get this!" He moaned. "How do you do it so good?"

"My father made me practice out of a workbook after school and over the summer," I said. "And I had to do ten a day. If I got one wrong, I did two in place of it. You could see how that would turn out." He jaw dropped.

"That's insane! Your dad is really weird." He shook his head. "And demanding."

"Yes, but I'm better now, aren't I?" I shrugged. "Also, I had to be better than anyone else. I had certain bad traits that would eventually make me even lower in status."

"Yeah, I guess you are right." He conceded. "You do maths that I can't even conceive of. Like those strange L shaped things."

"You mean the anti derivative signs?"

"I guess. What are those?"

"The opposite of the derivative," I felt myself launching into a full mathematical explanation. Oh, well. Lucky Iceland. "A derivative is the tangent line at a certain point of the graph. It is labelled usually 'f prime of x'. Each point has its own tangent line. Knowing this line, we can find if the function is increasing or decreasing using just the function in standard notation. The anti derivative is basically finding the original function from its derivative. Also it is called an integral. Usually these integrals are used to find the area under the curve, of course, noting that these are *indefinite* integrals, which are the said latter anti derivatives."

"What?" Iceland looked like he was drawing a blank. "How?"

"We can also find it using Riemann sum. There are different types. Riemann sum are rectangles drawn on the curve. Of course, if you know how to calculate the integral with the Theorem of Calculus, you'll be all set. Even though all of this had absolutely nothing to do with logarithms, it was still nice to explain."

"You sound like Germany." He noted. "Nerdy."

"I don't go telling everyone this," I countered. "I'm not showing off. You just asked, what is the L shaped thing."

"You give me a whole class on calculus!" He laughed good naturedly. "Its good to know though. Thanks."

"Okay, have a good afternoon. I need to go work on my production,"

"Hmm, good luck. I hate plays." He snickered. "Maybe I'll come watch you."

"Hah, don't expect much,"

"I don't ever expect with you," he sniffed. "You taught me looks aren't always highway signals."

"And you say I'm bad at comparing."

"I caught your wave," he smiled. "I spend too much time listening to you."

"Have fun with your maths." I closed the door and went out into our courtyard. Some students were already out there, hidden amongst the thick pines. It was very warm for February, but the clouds and fog in the morning were telling me not to get too comfy. Soon we would have some precipitation and possibly high winds. Yet the future was still bright. I always looked into it as much as possible. It was so much clearer and brighter since I was accepted here. I was even scheming how to get my father off of his smoking addiction. He somehow quit drinking--but that was because he was scared into it and because he wanted to. I walked along the walkway that led to our huge stone and marble library. It was a cross between modern and ancient. The large towering bookshelves of many levels towered over everything and the vaulted ceiling with intricate mosaic patterns was painted above. To reach the topmost books, several walkways made of glass made climbing up and searching easy and accessible. Unless you were scared of heights. A circular glass pane illuminated a beautiful statue in the middle of the hall, a winding serpent with feathered wings being held by a valiant hero. Water was trickling out of its mouth and into the pool below. It made a pleasing sound of water over stone that echoed across the whole silent building. The rest of the library was alight by wide iron chandeliers with large wax candles in them. I imagined how hard it must be to switch the candles out each time. Students were seen here and there, and I descended the steps down to one of the tiers below the ground, under the beautiful structure where darkness was cut by glimmering torches of artificial flame which looked so real till you passed it and found that it elicited no heat. You could have your hand hover in the middle; nothing would happen. Old manuscripts and thick hardbound books stood in rows, all under the low and claustrophobic ceiling. The rows were packed so close together that no two people could pass each other. I went around, searching for the section I was reading from: banned books

of the modern century. These books were prohibited in modern countries, and many were from totalitarian governments. I found books by Lermontov, and was currently searching for other ones that my own father commanded be away from public eye. Not that I wasn't heeding his wishes. He needn't know what I do. I'm an adult now, after all. I can make my own choices when I feel they're right. Not very rule has to be taken to heart. I was in the middle of searching through the section glancing at old, new, beaten, still in plastic, chained, clasped, thick, thin, and all other types of books imaginable when I felt the presence of someone else. It was sort of unnerving being down there, under the low ceiling, small and narrow pathways though the shelves, the artificial torches with their programmed flicker cycle, and the eerie quiet of knowing that the books here had caused so many reverts and changes in history as well as fully understanding that the knowledge found here cannot be told to many. The person who came down made no noise, and though it was expected, it felt chilling. The soft footsteps became slightly louder and then stopped. Again, the cycle repeated. It did so till I heard the voice humming a little tune to themselves. I turned to peer though the shelves to look. Japan. Instantly, I had the urge to slink away. On second thought, never mind. It would look cowardly and childish of me. I would have to stick it out. Too bad that she moved closer and closer to me. I involuntarily held my breath and pretended to be searching though the books. She came closer and closer. Then she turned to me, as if practiced and sighed. I was ready for a response.

"Well, hello," I said politely.

"Hi Rus," she waved nervously. "Um, nice day for looking at books, right?"

"Mhmm, banned books in particular," I nodded. She looked very uncomfortable, and clutched the ends of her pink sleeves. I sighed, not holding the tension any longer.

"Look, I'm sorry," We said in unison. She smiled a little.

"No, I really am," She shook her head. "For telling everyone and everything."

"Mm, I shouldn't have reacted so explosively." I said. "I think it's sort of my fault for yelling at you and making everything worse."

"I think it's mine in root, though. I even asked Vietnam to tell you, so that you wouldn't be as mad. Then I forgot that we didn't have engineering today. It made me sad, so I came here. What a surprise I found" she giggled, obviously anxiety wracked, and extended her arms like she was hesitating. "Friends?" She asked tentatively.

I returned her hug. "Friends." She smiled.

"Thanks," she curiously looked at the book in my hands. "Are we in the prohibited books section? I don't really pay attention to placards."

"Yes," I said, looking at my watch. It read that I had ten minutes before my super great fantastic showtime with professor France. Hooray for drama. I've had enough already. "Sorry to leave like this, but I have to go. Practice,"

"Oh, for what?"

"Theatre," I made a face. "In the auditorium. I'd rather no one watch. But alas, it's a play after all."

"Maybe I'll come," she shrugged. "To watch?"

"I beg you to not," I started to make my way out, marking which book I was going to take with a special tab on books. It marked that I had waitlisted it and that nobody could check it out of the building. Japan stayed behind to leaf through some old books from the century before. Each shelf had books sorted by age, language, and topic. It was meticulous work. I appreciated it. I walked out of the dark underground and into the lit main hall and broke into a run as I left. I was probably going to be late. But I always was. It wasn't a big deal. Now that I had the large issue disintegrate like a limestone block off of my shoulders, I was free to go on. On to newer, ever changing, ever morphing new roadblocks.

When the Hourglass Spins

[image]

I didn't expect to be rammed by Japan today. It was, to say, a boring day. I breezed through Spanish class with out even noticing the time. We were reading an abridged version of Don Quixote, and it was quite an entertaining book; I prided myself in reading it in the original language. All in all, I was pleased, since I didn't have to talk to people, everyone was quiet, and I was able to focus on my work. It was the sort of class where Professor Spain taught mostly in Spanish, which he probably enjoyed, and would talk faster than he could in English. Sometimes even the native speakers would look at him quizzically. After the class had ended, he motioned me over and asked me to tell people around that an ice rink was opening up soon near campus and I should alert students who are interested in making a hockey or figure skating teams. I didn't know anyone except Russia or Finland who would take the bait on it, but I promised I'd try. After we were let out of the last classes of the day, I decided that I would do homework. Heh, too bad they didn't assign me any. Again, it was one of those days that I needed to do something or else it would seem I was procrastinating. Then I would feel guilty and make myself a project to do. Maybe I should just go walk somewhere. Yes, a walk would do good. I put down all of my things into my dorm room, where Finland was busy using his e-cigarette, and I went out along one of the paths leading to the peaceful grove near the arts centre. I was surprised by the warmth of the weather, since it was February. I thought it would be cold and awful in general, but I guessed it had to do something with the shoreline marine climate zone. After all, I lived in a continental area for most of my life, so we had more extreme heat waves and cold, bitter frosts. The small grove of trees in which not many liked to sit was a recent discovery of mine. The patch of the strange twisted trees was behind a building, strategically placed out of view. With the sun in the west, the building elicited a shadow away from the grove, making the mass of trees sunny and warm. Feeling a bit adventurous, I slowly made my way up to one of the topmost tree branches that was thick enough to support me. I could see

much of the going on around the non obstructed area. Most of the trees still had their leaves, which made them even stranger. The leaves took on a waxy appearance, as if they were made of plastic. They were all green, yellow, and some were orange. Most of them were spear shaped and gleamed in the sunlight. Initially after dozing off and almost being blown off by an unexpected gust of wind, I climbed, or dropped in my case, down to the peaty ground below. It was still moist and springy, like after dew. That's enough tree scaling for me today. I thought of what I was going to do while I walked back down to the main circle of the campus, when someone hammered into me as if they were in a hurry and didn't look where they were going.

"Ah, sorry!" It was Japan in her fluffy sweater and bow shaped earrings. What a surprise. "Oh, hi Germany!"

"Hello," I muttered, as Japan picked my glasses off the concrete and handing them gingerly to me. Oh, good. They weren't broken.

"Where are you going?" She asked as I adjusted them on my face once more.

"I don't know. I was just wandering around."

"If you have nothing to do, you can go to the Auditorium," she suggested. "Russia is there."

"Doing what?"

"Theatre stuff." She answered in short. "He's in Professor France's production of the Queen of Spades."

"Oh," I remembered. "Yes. Maybe I'll come."

She pointed in the general direction. "Over there." She started to leave.

"Oh, Japan!" I remembered about what Professor Spain asked. The announcement. But without further speaking, she bounced off, looking happy and light. Whatever had happened, she seemed overjoyed about it. Whatever, I'll tell her later. Picking up my lazy pace, I walked towards the large stadium like building which

housed not only the auditorium but the second largest organ in the world. The first was also on campus. You could see the pipes snaking around and out. The doors were guarded by an overhang of carved leaves and birds and a sword with ivy wrapped around it was the door handle. You had to take the hilt to open it. With some effort, I entered the darkened hall and the heavy door closed behind me with a loud bang. Apart from a few mutters and murmurs from the professors in their classrooms, and the steady hum of someone playing the large organ, there was no sound. I walked on, consciously trying to make no noise, but my heels would click slightly on the hard flooring. The last room at the end of the hall was the auditorium. Trying to not attract much attention I slipped inside to find the dark and huge theatre to be broadcasting the making of a play. Professor France was running the whole thing smoothly, telling where everyone should go, choreographing and placing people on their spots, giving sticks and other miscellaneous items as props where needed. I sat down near the back to watch the unfolding. Sometimes it was prosaic and repetitive, other times gripping. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Russia along with an older girl and a man sitting near the stage. All three looked exceedingly bored, the girl flipping through her script, the man fanning himself with a homemade paper fan and Russia was absentmindedly whistling.

"And now, the scene which I had incorporated!" Professor France smiled and waved to Russia and the girl. Russia looked like he was asked to jump into a volcano, and the girl looked like she wanted to jump into one. Both made their way up to the stage. "Now. Dance." She said dramatically waving her hands to the fraught pair.

"How?" The girl asked. Her light brown eyes darted here and there.

"You don't know the waltz?" France asked incredulously. "Russia, do you know?"

"Somewhat," he answered.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Uhh, we didn't want to make you sad?" Russia suggested.

France sighed. "Now you've made me even sadder. Alright, we'll skip this! To the next scene: Hermann right before the great losing. Israel, don't slink off. We still need you," she seized Russia by the arm and almost dragged him across the stage to a seat. "Okay. Do you remember you lines?" She said almost pleading.

"Yes,"

"Oh, good," she sighed in relief. "So--Act three, scene two!"

Russia shuffled a couple of index cards substituting real blackjack ones. "So, the Queen won't avail. So be it. I place my bet. Forty thousand rubles," he places one of the cards down, the three. In the play, one of the three lucky combinations of cards would have to always win. The others around him, supposedly the officers all gasp at the winning. He places another bet and wins again, this time with the seven. The scene ends with Hermann going home rich. The next scene would certainly be the worst.

"The last scene," France called. Russia nodded and resumed. The narrator announced the next day, (in the play, of course) and Hermann feels rash, and he places the betting on his everything to win...only to find the ace be the Queen of Spades--the dead countess that he had killed to obtain the lucky combination. The Queen would laugh chillingly and Hermann would go crazy from losing everything. That was the end to the sad poem. "Brilliant!" France shouted in glee as Russia lifted his head off the floor, where his character ended his life. "I think we've gotten it! Good job everyone!" She dismissed the students who left without further needing. I walked up to Russia, who seemed surprised to see me.

"Germany, what are doing here?"

"I was watching you," I smiled.

"Watching me?" His sparkling eyes went wide. "Really? I didn't even notice,"

"You were great," I said as we left the building and out into the fresh air. "You fit the character,"

"Hopefully my end won't be like Hermann's," he chuckled. "I don't gamble. Never will." We walked along the path, and suddenly, I remembered. The announcement!

"Oh, Russia," I prodded his side.

"Yes?"

"Professor Spain asked me to spread the word about some sort of ice rink around here."

"A rink? Here?" He blinked twice.

"A little away from campus," I explained. He was elated at what I said. "Just wanted to tell you. I almost forgot."

"That's great!" He seemed very, very happy.

¨You like to skate, I know," I giggled.

"My life basically revolved around the rink. My best achievements were on the ice, my first scar was from falling on the ice, and really, anything I do goes around it." He showed me a small insignificant patch of skin on his chin which was dark pink. It looked like it was old, and never really healed.

"Uh, that's...good about the achievement... and bad...that you fell, of course," I said.

"I fell on my chin twice," he went on. "Once because I forgot to take off the hard guards on my blades, which was embarrassing, since everyone was watching. And second when I was too tired to continue and I did a Biellmann. Basically bringing your leg up and just skating on one foot. I tripped on my toe-pick and then...well you get the point." He rubbed it consciously. "Father wanted to bring me to a clinic. I said no. Last thing I needed were stitches. I heard they hurt. But I'm fine now. I've learned to not do Biellmann's ever again,"

I winced. "Sounds like it hurt,"

"No, it didn't. I didn't even feel pain. I just got up again, brushed my

chin and saw that my gloves were red. All that happened was that I now have a permanent crack in my front teeth, but what can I say? Sacrifices," he shrugged, seemingly unfazed by his past injury. "At least I didn't fall off of a trash can. Like Ukraine. His whole jaw had a large gash in it. Beautiful childhood memories," he looked down at me. "So you came to tell me about the announcement?"

"And I was bored," I reminded him. "Teachers don't give us homework,"

"Hah! I wish my teachers didn't give homework," he barked. "Because they sure do."

"We should switch then," I joked. "Because Philosophy had turned into a nagging requirement in the back of my head."

"What about it?"

"It's been so...lest to say, not as expected. Andorra lives in her own world of tea and hibiscus flowers and kidney stone problems. She doesn't pay attention to half of what's being said." Russia stifled a laugh.

"That shouldn't be funny, but it is,"

"No, it is funny. And sad at the same time. I'm sure she's not like that all the time, but others in my class have started to call her 'loony cloud Andy' because of how she just floats around. On the other hand, I kind of admire her calmness. A tornado can hit the place and she'd still be placid. It can almost be called beneficial."

"Is she just lethargic all the time?" He looked deep in thought. "Or it might be pretending. You never know."

"I guess," Russia took his ushanka off, holding it in one hand. The still and thin air was all around us, and I could hear the distant buzzing of cars in traffic. It was seventeen o clock. The traffic prime time. I could subtly scent the spearmint flavour of gum coming from Russia's mouth as he chewed rather noisily. I had absolutely no idea where we were going, so I let him lead to wherever him and his fast paced, ever changing consciousness wanted to go. I guessed that's

why he liked calculus; since the subject was about ever changing data. My interests were also starting to change. With the end of our economics class, I felt even less positive about my choices. The ever increasing grapple between the lines of markets and values left me spinning. I was surprised at some of the talents of America, who was adept at pushing bounds, patience, and prices of the opposition. Smooth and slow talkers that could seamlessly watch, manipulate, and leap at small opportunities were perfect for the typical or atypical broker and stocks managers. I was tongue tied and hesitant, too much so that Indonesia looked at me with hidden pity most of the time. I lost the luster of the high pressurized economic market. I needed something different. How uncanny that I just realised that. Funny how that happens.

"Have you ever felt guilty, or erring about changing?" I suddenly asked aloud. I didn't mean to say the phrase. It just slipped out. I guess I should continue then. "About shifting interests or hobbies?"

"Definitely," was the response. "Unquestionably. All the time, actually. I feel so culpable of abandoning my violin. I shouldn't do that. It not only cost me money, but also time. I pick it up once in a while, but I've forgotten the notes on paper. I rely solely on muscle memory." He smiled and took one of my cold hands in his. "You feel as if you need to let go of something as well?"

"Yes. I need to switch my major."

His arm travelled from my hand to the shoulder. "Oh, well, it's better now than at the end of your third year," he joked, pressing me to himself. He'd always want to be the one to do everything. I tried to slip my own hand in his, but he would stubbornly reject. Not that it particularly mattered, but I felt as though I was the subordinate. I've come to notice that Russia wasn't egotistical, but rather dominant in what he did. Even though he was pretty talkative with me, he was still quiet with other people outside his dubbed circle of trust. He could cut off his sentences and trail off, continuing his verses in his own mind. He couldn't pretend he didn't like me. It was too strong of a connection, no matter how many times America would stare, or how many people Japan would tell, or how much times Iceland would snigger. All of that could be forgotten. But he would still avoid any subject about any sort of

feelings or emotions. He still hasn't gotten control over his own, much rather to disentangle the web between us. But I was patient. I could wait. Even though he didn't show affection often, he was a good vent to talk to, and would support me if I even felt a bit distressed. If under the right circumstances (evening time) and around the right crowd (no one) he could be strongly caring, fond, and loving to the point where he would allow me to sit on his lap. We still didn't understand each other deeply, but what mattered was he welcomed me for who I am, not who I ever was.

My Vote is Vetoed, Again

[image]

Hooray for acne! How I love when those disgusting pimples just congregate and spring up like mushrooms all over my chest, upper back and temples. Just brilliant, nature! The best part was that the rest of me, including my hands, cheeks, and elbows were horribly, as father dubbed it 'surgically dry'. During this time, usually father would gather his vodka supply from the cellar and scrub me down with the vile heating liquid each night. He would know if I picked at any of the infections if I elicited a hiss of pain. The antiseptic properties were perfect for expelling oil secretion, bacteria, and burning your stomach lining creating your standard ulcer. It would dry my skin badly, the oily parts would turn tight, and the dry would peel.

About three years ago, after a huge fight, broken car door, and ripped shirt, I went to see a doctor with father, whom prescribed a cream for it. Of course, the stupid stuff had to be applied nightly and every morning. Like I'd do that. Sometimes I would forget, others I would feel too lazy. And even others where I didn't feel like going though the whole routine of washing my face, first with water then vodka, then waiting for it to dry, then applying micellar water, then waiting again, then the cream, then the useless moisturizer, then the sunscreen, because the cream would make the skin sensitive to burns. How nice. The best part was that it didn't even help me. Granted, it worked perfectly while I was on treatment. As soon as I stopped, they would come back.

Only during the spring, from late February to early July, I would suffer the constant nagging of my father, the giggling of my brother, the pity from my sister, and baby Kazakhstan with his knowing eyes, understanding but not voicing. Now that I was newly freed, I had the choice to continue or to see what would happen if I tried to quit the treatment. Not feeling brave enough today, I quickly went through the whole routine, only to be bothered twice by Iceland who apparently was dying to use the restroom. I let him in and

finished my business with my phone camera. After he finished, he came out with a harassed look on his face.

"What?" I asked.

"The stupid faucet doesn't work." He growled and tossed his damp towel on his bed.

"Both?"

"No, just mine," he put on his grey long sleeve and a pair of khaki dress pants. "Lucky yours didn't break,"

"Haven't you realised that if you push just a tad more, you might just break the thing," I said, lathering on the sunscreen.

"Uh, I'm careful," he rolled his eyes, the snickered at what I was doing. "You look like those girls at high school, applying their facial toner and mascara."

"Believe me this is a pain," I sighed, putting the bottle back in the small refrigerator we had. Not only was it useless, but it had to refrigerated like food. "But if I see whiteheads, I start to pick at them, they get infected, and then I'll never get over the cycle."

"Aren't you old enough to stop having acne problems?" He asked, opening the balcony door.

"I don't know," I shrugged, straightening up. "All I know is that it only happens in the spring. And this has been going on since I hit thirteen, every year it's gotten worse and worse. But for a while now, ever since...about seventeen I think....it's getting better." I stowed my phone away in my pocket. "Slower than the acceleration of it though,"

"Allergies?" He cocked his head to the side. "Maybe?"

"It might be, but what?" I was ready to start the day. As routine, Iceland and I have been getting up at the same time every day, no matter class or weekend, to make it easier on ourselves. "Okay, we can go now."

Iceland stepped out first opening the door in front of me and bowed. "After you, Madame," I cuffed him on the neck for that. He ruefully looked back at me and I stuck my tongue out in response.

"Your punishment," I said triumphantly.

"What's the crime?" He raised his brows but didn't repeat the jibe after we had left the gates of the college. Apparently, last night America the night owl had texted Iceland to ask me to come with them to 'explore' somewhere. There were too many unknowns in the equation for me, but I had no choice but to submit. Besides, America said he'd drag Germany along. Not that I was excited about it. Just, happy. It had started to become colder once more. After the sunny day all those weeks ago, the weather turned harsh and cold. The winds picked up to get everyone ready for March, and snow even fell, covering the spires, buildings, and statues as well as everyone's heads, boots, and patience. The snow stayed and hadn't melted yet, but instead congregated near roads, making it all mushy and brown. The breeze in my face made it agitated and crisp, so much so, that I had to untie my earflaps again and bring it over the sides of my face. We walked along mostly in silence away from the sleepy campus. America, in his t shirt in the middle of a windy gale, was waving to us. At least rule didn't wear flip flops....like last time. He was drinking an ice coffee and was leaning against the main gate. Germany, in his thick jacket and a scarlet red scarf over his head, was standing a bit away from America and was staring out in the distance.

"Oh, finally!" America frantically yelled, mentioning us to come over. He shook my hand and patted Iceland's shoulder. Germany waved to us and hugged me. "I was awoken by my awful alarm clock today. As well as my dad's yelling." He looked up at us and smiled.

"Ah, what can I say?" I shook my head. "Does he yell on purpose?"

"Duh, no." America fiddled with his keys. "Like, last time, he yelled at me for putting mustard in the sink. I mean, it was on the plate. No, he had to come up to my room, yell at me for my mess in the room, for not doing the laundry, for leaving mustard in the sink, and for killing 'George's Snack'."

"I'm afraid to ask who's George?" Iceland asked.

"Australia's weird bird. The thing flaps around outside and thinks the whole house is its personal toilet. I make sure the thing is out of the house every time we have guests. Less questions,"

"Oh boy," Iceland grimaced.

"It eats cockroaches," America shuddered. "We have to buy them--alive. You cannot imagine how disgusting it is. Dad told me that now some have escaped. Those things multiply, you know. That killed all chances of me coming back to the house. Unless I use my old DDT insecticide spray."

"Hmm, good luck with that," Germany said.

"Thanks," America looked around our group."So it's the Boy's Club today?"

"Yes," I nodded. "Apparently, Japan is out the peisage."

"Nobody invited Japan." Iceland explained for him.

America smiled. "So polite and correct, Rus,"

I tugged at the fur trim of my hood. "What? I answered your question."

"Whatever," he sighed. "Next time, say 'yeah', okay?" He sipped his coffee again.

"Fine,"

"Great, now guys, I found this old house," he continued, seemingly excited.

"Full of cockroaches?" I asked innocently. "Your friends?"

He shook his head. "No, old stuff!" He beamed. "Stuff that they don't sell in stores. I found it at the edge of my town. I was exploring, and I came across it at the edge of the woods. There was some yellow caution tape all over it, but it was old. I went in and found heaps of

things! Old things, ancient almost. Like statuettes, candles, clothes..."

"...dust and dead animals, too." I finished for him. "Now I see why this was a surprise. Because this is a horrible idea. I vote to *not* go."

America crossed his arms. "First order of business. All of your votes are automatically vetoed, Rus." he paused, saw my facial expression, then continued on, more meekly. "*And*, there are old books for people like you and Germany," America smiled. "You like that stuff right? And mainly written in some other European language. Maybe German."

"Did it have accent marks?" Germany asked.

"Sorry Germany, I'm bad at languages. I take Spanish 2, which is an embarrassment. I used to be so good. So I don't know. You'll have to see for yourself." Germany looked disappointed in America's statement, but said nothing, instead pursed his lips tightly. He adjusted his scarf over his head to better shield his face from the wind. Meanwhile, my own face felt like a thin mask of tight skin, and the urge to itch it was unbearable. Patience, Russia. Too bad I had none. I exposed the side of my face to the air to itch it, trying to make it unnoticeable. Unfortunately, America did notice - and he had to announce it. "Woah, Rus, what happened to your face!?" He pointed to my temples. Iceland facepalmed.

"Thanks for announcing it," I said sourly, hiding the spots. "Its acne." Germany looked at me sympathetically, but America openly stared. A little too closely. I stared back till he stopped.

"Aren't you too old for that?" He frowned.

"Uh, I think it's an allergic reaction to something. It only happens in the spring,"

"You must hate spring then," he signalled for us to follow him towards his Cadillac. On the way, literally three metres from the gates to the car, America had spilled his coffee over his shoe and almost killed a pigeon. "Ugh, those dumb birds," he growled at the startled winged creature which had flown off. He drove us to the

edge of his town, all the way singing rap this time. The amount of English swears I learned from that car ride was innumerable. Now that was a lesson in the language. Most of the time, I had to plug my ears to not hear the heinous and vile lyrics. I mean, how many times can you curse in a second? Apparently, two point sixty four. I counted. And America was singing along, the terms that he just memorized without knowing the actual meaning, words flying out of his mouth like bullets. I didn't even look his way. He turned on a classical music station quickly as we entered his street. To not give heart attacks to all of the other old rich couples that lived on the lane. He parked the car on the end of the curl de sac. "We're here!" He sung in his high soprano voice.

"That....was bad," Germany flopped out of the car very un-gracefully.

"I know," I agreed. Iceland nodded.

"Yeah, America. How many times did you listen to that to memorize it?"

"Exactly two hours," he led the way into the woods. "Come on,"

"Marching to our doom," I muttered. But I had no choice but to follow. Germany trailed behind me, and Iceland evened up with America. We came up to a strange and creaky old house that looked abandoned years ago. Fallen trees and rotted bushes showed that this place used to be tended, but them was left or even wrecked. There was no door. It was lying rotted away in a greenish pool. Probably a marshy pond of sorts. The windows were all cracked and spiderwebbed, layered in dust and grime. It reminded me of the dilapidated house on chicken feet of Baba Yagá, the old crone that lived in Russian fairy tales. The fact that it was an eerie representation of the child eating old lady's home did not help me. America and Iceland entered first, and then we went after them. The dust bit my eyes and Germany sneezed. It definitely looked mistreated. Many shelves and broken furniture littered the corners and everything was covered in a thick layer of debris and soot.

"Ta da!" America announced looking over the room. "Lovely."

"I never thought you were the type to go digging around old houses," I said.

"Well, sometimes I like it. Especially when I'm bored. Cool stuff you can find. After you dust it off," he picked up a metal tin and blew on it. Millions of layers of dirt flew everywhere as he shook the thing. It was a brass tray with many little leaves carved into the soft metal. It looked Greek. "See?"

"Great," I yawned slightly.

He pointed to a stack of books on the floor in a messy pile. "Look, books." Germany went over and knelt to look at them. He gave me a wistful look as he leafed through the pile.

"Most of these are in French." He sighed, flipping though the old library. "There's one in German, right here," he pointed to the peeling cover with golden leaf. "But it's just a fairy tale collection. Here is a.....hmm, a....Polish book? I don't know." He looked it over. "Maybe Hungarian." He went through the pile relatively quickly, and handed one very fragile looking copy. "I think this is Russian. Not sure," I looked over the cover. Interesting. The book was dated, and obviously was an opposer of my father. The person who wrote it sounded intelligent and well versed in politics and was up to date on the going ons at St. Petersburg at the time. I became invested in it so much that I didn't even notice America behind me.

"Like the book?" He surprised me so much that I snapped the book and hissed in his direction. "Ooh, sorry!"

"You startled me," I muttered. "But yes, I have."

"Yay, see how good it was to come here?" He motioned to Germany, who was busily deciphering words with the little French he had.

"Does your father know about this place?" Iceland asked, pulling on an old spring.

"Oh *no*," America's eye widened. "I'd show you guys first. Maybe then I'll hint that I found it."

"Aw, so nice," Iceland smiled. "I kind of want this thing." He

motioned to a wire with a sharp hook on it. "It looks good for fishing."

"Go ahead." He waved passively. "Take wherever." We took his advice. I managed to find a ship in a bottle, a nice looking sailors coat, the strange book, and quite a few ink bottles. Germany scrounged up a vase, a small painting, and took a few of the books. Once we left the house, I breathed a sigh of relief and fresh air. The polluted air inside was making my lungs irritated.

"Nice way to spend the morning," Germany said to me as we braced ourselves for more American rap music. It didn't occur to me that there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice when he said that.

"I could think of a million other good things to do," I told him back.

"The day's not over yet," he pointed out, tugging at his scarf. "I'm not planning to mope around in my room all day with my flatmate." He paused for a second, probably considering what to say next. "Because I'd rather spend the day with you."

Where the Wind Takes Me

[image]

Well. Today was a horrible day. I was in my car, staring out at the government building that I just was in. Sighing, I rested my head on the steering wheel, thinking of what I could do. I lost my job. Well, better to say, my factory closed down. I don't know what to do. Tears threatened to flow, and my brow was permanently scrunched up in worry and pain. I watched wistfully the other people coming out of the building, all in expensive tailored jackets, designer handbags, gold watches, and ropes of jewellery. I watched them, my heart dark with envy and anger. I didn't know how I would come home and pretend that it was a normal day. I didn't need to worry my children, since it would negatively affect their already negatively affected lives. Sitting in my hard beaten car, I wondered how to go on. To admit defeat was not an option. To go on pension? That would mean to become an officially deceased country. Not if I can help it. I was calculating my costs and debts out to see if I could just self sustain on our farmland, when somebody rapped the window on my passenger side. I looked up to see a certain Englishman, all decked up in his formal suit and top hat, signalling that he wanted to talk. Sighing, I opened my window.

"Well, hello." I detested my accent. It made me sound so lowly and aggressive.

"Good day, Soviet," Britain nodded. His refined and calm voice

radiated much authority. "Mind to talk for a bit? I know you must be terribly busy, yet it seems I've found you in a time that you are not. Are you up for a stroll?"

I wanted to hiss in his face and ask his arrogant self to leave, but instead I nodded and said: "Hm, I see no reason why not."

"Excellent," he smiled. "There is quiet a nice place right around the corner," He waited till I climbed out of the car and we walked side by side down the block. I felt a bit awkward walking down such a fancy part of town in a tan frock coat and much abused brownish ushanka (I don't bother to even wash it anymore.) As the second tallest country in the world, Britain was dwarfed by my sheer size, but he remained his steady and purposeful stride along side me. We eventually came to a nice looking park, where instead of trees and brambles were statuettes and trimmed bushes. Walking along in silence, I was not sure why he brought me here. I felt trapped by the petite walkways inlaid with intricate patterns, nearly cut grass, quiet fountains and pleasing architecture. It reminded me sort of my father's own gardens where I used to play by myself, alone and left out. I never wanted my children to ever be alone--that's why I have so many of them. Britain took out his luxurious gold timepiece on a chain and looked at the time. I couldn't even tear my eyes away from the face of the clock, the small gems and the facets, and the cost of it...Britain must've seen me stare with my hungry eye, because he pocketed the thing quickly. "Is...something bothering you, Soviet?"

"Me? No, not at all." I lied, shaking my head. Again, I didn't speak often to not hear my own awful accent. How I hated it. How stupid and uneducated it made me sound. Britain looked like he was unsure of trusting my answer, and I smiled a little too widely in response.

"Are you sure?"

"Mhmm," I frantically nodded. Alright, my lie was falling to pieces. Britain wasn't naïve or oblivious. He caught on.

"I'm serious, Soviet. I don't like to mess in people's personal business, but..." uh huh, Britain. Say that to all your servants, as to

say, colonies. I'm sure they were happy enough to let you meddle in their affairs. "...I also don't like when people suffer alone."

"That's literally been most of my life!" Ugh, that 'e' sound. I can't ever get it right. Britain swiped his tongue over his lips before sighing.

"You must know your son is a gifted child," he went on.

"I do."

"And you must be around of him. He really has a bright future. I picked his application out personally."

"Yes, I know." I didn't know. Why would he be so invested in my child?

"But people aren't defined solely as they are on paper. They have personality. They have habits," I had no idea where this conversation was getting us to. "And I must note some...discrepancies and idiosyncrasies....with you," he looked up with his grey gaze that reflected fog, rain, wisdom, and knowing. "I see how he looks at things. So serious. All for profit."

"Are you implying that I taught him that?" I said, offended. But to the other, it probably sounded antagonistic and confrontational. He backed away a few paces, clenching his teeth.

"Soviet...." he put his hands up as if to wave the white flag.

"Sorry," I muttered, looking down. "I didn't mean it to sound so...belligerent."

He regained most of his placid demeanour. "It's quite alright. I didn't expect you to not be." His comment was touching my nerve a little, but I didn't want to stir another problem up. "But comparison to others is hardly the way to go."

"What do you want to say, Britain?" I asked, already annoyed at his beating around the bush techniques. It seemed so popular within the English speaking world. "Speak plainly,"

"Ah, but that's what'll make you even more upset," he looked down at a pool of water with fish in it. They were golden and fat, and lazily swam around their strange clear pool. I didn't know how to answer his question. So we both looked into the pond, not saying a word, staring at the fish. I thought they were called a fancy name...Kai, or Koi. Yes, Koi fish. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

"Britain," I said quietly.

"Yes?" He answered without turning. Many of the other people had left already, and we were alone. The birds all chirped and squabbled, and all the wildlife scurried back into their trees and stumps. It was getting late. My children would be worried.

I wasn't the type to avoid straightforward answers. So I spoke plainly. "I lost my job today."

He looked up at me, surprised and sympathetic. "I'm sorry to hear that," he didn't say anything more, and averted his eyes to the sunset. I chewed on my inner lip till I tasted blood, while he stared at the sun till he couldn't no more. Like children, we avoided the uncomfortable and decided to keep both of our thoughts and words to ourselves. I was considering to just leave and forget the whole conversation. I inhaled deeply to say that I was going to leave when he started to speak again. "Maybe-," he saw that I was going to speak. "Go on,"

"No, no," I waved my hand dismissively. "You can say what you must."

"I was going to say...let me think your problem out...maybe I can get you some sort of job...what is it you do again?"

"Ah, applied physics and mathematics,"

"Alright. How about I call you tomorrow? At noon, maybe?" He suggested. Since I had absolutely no choice, I agreed. Only under the one condition that this issue won't trickle out into public: mainly to my son's attention. Secondly, for my dying ego. We shook hands and parted our ways, him continuing to walk down the path, and I retraced our steps back to my car. It took me a while to start

my engine, and I hoped that I wouldn't need to buy another car. That wouldn't be good. Right as I was going to back out, my phone rung. Home number.

"Алло," I said.

"Papa," it was Ukraine. "Where are you?"

"I'm coming home, sunshine." I told him. "I had something come up....at work." I didn't realise my voice faltered.

"Papa...." he stopped his sentence.

"Yes?"

"Did you....get fired?" How nice. My own children know.

I didn't lie. "Yes, Ukraine. I'll discuss this at home."

"Okay," his voice sounded like he was holding back tears.

"I will be home soon," I promised.

"Goodbye." He choked out and ended the call. Great. I turned up a radio station and sped up above the speed limit on the northbound highway. Traffic was low today, and I was able to luckily meet no police. Not that they cared. It was the beginning of the month--no end of the month bonus checks. The sun set and the nightlife awoke, the huge lampposts all turning on at the same time. All the time I wasn't listening to the station I turned for. I was in my own thoughts. Was Britain actually going to help? Most likely not. He had other things to worry about. If a factory with more than sixty years of operation closed down, what would he offer? And anyway, he might not need my services. I didn't actually build things most of the time. I designed, calculated risk, and ran endless data sheets. That was one of the most important jobs in the process. I had planned that Germany would do that when he got older, so that I could do other things, but he ran off to university. Russia wouldn't have the patience to do it. They were better off doing whatever they wanted. I rolled into my long driveway to be met by my three youngest. They were sitting on the doorstep, in total darkness. It was dark by this time. Ukraine had Kazakhstan in his arms, and

Belarus had her rooster. All were wide eyed and waiting for me.

"Hi papa," Kazakhstan came over to me.

"Hi Kazakhstan," I hugged him. He limply circled his arms around my neck. "How was your day?"

"Okay," he whispered. I led them back into the house. They all stayed silent, and I didn't engage in further conversation with any of them. I didn't have the strength to do what I promised them. It was all too fresh. I was okay with being unemployed when I was young and brazen. Now it was harder. I was so deep in my thoughts that I almost cut my finger. Alright, USSR. No more moping. You are in a situation--what are you going to do about it? You can't drink your troubles away. They'll just come back. I looked around. The whole situation wasn't as bad as I originally thought. I had a house; that couldn't be taken away, no matter what. I had land; it could be farmed. By the time I finished making whatever I made, some sort of mush, I felt better.

"Дети," I called quietly. "Dinner." They all came, silent like phantoms. It scared me. We all ate and no one said a word until I had cleaners the table.

"Papa," Belarus said. "Will everything be okay?"

"Yes, sweetie," I told her. "Just...let me talk with someone tomorrow, and we'll see what will be afterward." She nodded. Ukraine told me that Germany had called earlier, needing to say something.

"He said to call-," I did t let him finish and dialled Germany's mobile. He shouldn't be asleep yet. University students never slept till at least twenty three o'clock.

"Hello?" Came the small voice. He sounded

"Germany, you called here?" I asked him. I wanted to go sleep. But if he called, I couldn't just deny him; he was my adopted son after all in one way or another.

"Oh, yes. I did." He seemed to be nervous. About what though? How

could you be nervous when your only real responsibility was studying? But I was patient enough to hear him out.

"So?" I leaned on the doorway, simultaneously pushing a cabinet in place with my foot.

"Um, I think I should tell you later," he stuttered.

"Why not now?"

"Erm, I lost my confidence," he sighed. "I can't say."

"Well, it can't be that bad, what is-," I was cut off by him.

"I love Russia and I'm sorry," he said quickly and hung up. Wait...*What?* I tried to dial him back, but he wouldn't pick up the receiver. Sighing, I put my own phone down, groaned, and went up the stairs. To be perfectly honest, I didn't mind their relationship. That was my feeling deep down. On the surface, I had conflicting emotions. I knew they were close, but not that close. I figured their stark differences would set them apart, but I was wrong. With my mind reeling, after telling my children, I went to bed. The morning was wiser than the night. Everything will be done. Soon enough.

Алло - Hello (Common greeting on the phone)

Дети - Children/kids

I've been on a writing spree for the past few days, so that's why these chapters are coming out so quickly. When I write, I always like to incorporate not only the main characters' problems, but the issues and difficulties of the others (hence, the ever present employment obstacles...that are relatable to my life right now.)

So I hope you enjoy/appreciate this type of style.

Along Moon Washed Streets

[image]

Rain. Again. It's been raining for the past week now, and I am starting to share my flatmate's revulsion of rain. The grasses around our courtyard had turned mushy, flooded, and brown. It was repulsive to step into the squelching, muddy ground. Finland would say that soon I would like ketchup as well. He's been incorporating it into all of his dishes. It's been a week since I called USSR and told him. I sort of had a courageous moment, and when Ukraine picked up, all of my bravery fizzled out. What I didn't expect was when USSR called me back. I just told him what I wanted to say, and hung up. After that, I declined every single one of his calls, voice messages, sms, mms, etc. I knew he was either angry or fuming. But everything else was going smoothly. The mid March weather wasn't going to be any better than it was now, a thick mist. Some of the more withstanding and desperate students went outside to stand or walk in the fog of tiny droplets. I watched them from my balcony with Finland, who was close to finishing his project and was smoking his e-cigarette. Along with him was Serbia today. The practical man in a white raincoat and tan turtleneck was talking to my flatmate about applying for graduate studies, and they were in deep conversation. Since both weren't the talking type, they spoke in low muttering tones with sparse wording. I, as always, half listened to their conversation.

"So, finished your project yet?" Serbia took in a long inhale of smoke. "I have." He tapped his cigarette against the balcony railing letting the ashes fall over the edge.

"Soon enough," Finland murmured. "I've almost gotten my data in order. The writing part is the worst."

"Yes, having to write so eloquently has been a pain," Serbia agreed. "Did you go to the first presentation? They would have most of the information on writing."

"Yes, I did," the other groaned. "But all that did was waste time.

They talked nonsense and I didn't even understand half of what they said. What does making an outline have to do with anything?"

"I went to get some help from my advisor," Serbia said. "It could help you." He nodded in my direction. "I wish I was a first year again."

"I don't." Finland sighed, pausing to have a drag on his e-cigarette. "It was very boring."

"Speak for yourself," the other smiled. "I actually never learned anything, but it was a gratifying experience."

"...to be incessantly told things, caught black market trading, and not to mention, getting homework?" Finland finished for him. "No way."

"Hey, the black market thing wasn't even my idea,"

"Uh, yes it was," his friend argued. "Who else would be so rash?"

"Estonia."

Finland let out a bark of laughter. "Hah! You're funny."

"I'm serious, ask him,"

"Fine, I'll ask. But Estonia? He can't even order food at a restaurant without saying 'sorry'." He reached for his phone and texted his friend. After a few moments, his light blue eyes widened. "...how?! How are you right?"

"As if I'm ever wrong. Serbia is always right." Serbia replied in a cocky tone. "I told you. Anyway, don't think your best friend is that innocent. He might behave childlike, but that gives huge advantages." He stubbed his cigarette out in an ashtray and exhaled the last bit of smoke. "This weather is driving me mad." He shook his head like a stubborn ram.

"I know," Finland muttered. "Wet."

"Ah, can't get any worse, right? I need to write some emails, revise

my speaker notes, sleeps, and start filing my stupid application for graduate studies. Apparently, I'm overqualified for other programmes." He left soon after. Finland continued to smoke till his e-cigarette ran out of power and then he too went back inside. I looked down onto our mushy brown courtyard, now a marsh, thinking of whether or not I should finish my paper when I was told not to. A bird cawed somewhere in the distance, and several crows fluttered about, their feathers slick with rainwater. Even they were sick of it. Too much was too much. The railing on our balcony was cool and wet to the touch as a grasped it to look out into the distance.

"Germany, your phone's ringing," Finland suddenly materialised out of nowhere, and handed me my cell. I silently thanked him and saw the caller identification. Russia.

"Hello?" I said tentatively, clutching the collar of my shirt. For some reason, I always did that when I talked to him over the phone.

"Hi Germany," his voice sounded like static through the receiver. "Um, could you come down? I'm at the gates of your college. I need some help...on something."

"Of course," I replied automatically, even before my mind processed what I was getting into. The effort to please him was innumerable.

"Oh, thank you." He said cheerfully and hung up before I even got the chance to ask what he needed. Typical Russia. I threw on a raincoat and went out into the drizzle outside. Soon enough, I spotted Russia with a yellow umbrella. He was waiting for me, meanwhile staring at the announcement board near our building. Of course, all of the papers were wet. Like everything was. He saw me and waved in my direction. "Hello!" He smiled.

"Good evening," I opened the gate. "As good as it can get. So what did you need?"

He seemed nervous to continue. "Well...actually, I kind of wanted to...it's not really academic....so..." he went on babbling about something.

I had an inkling of where the conversation was going. "You want to go somewhere?"

After that phrase, Russia seemed to collect his confidence, because his words came out fast and straightforward. "I wanted to just ask you out. Just me and you." He finished, looking down and muttering, blushing heavily. I was touched by his offer.

"To where?"

"Just...to a place I found...on the edge of the city...."

"I'd be happy to," I responded to his surprise.

"Really?" His eyes became round like the full moon. I nodded and we set off. I felt the little drizzle turn back to mist, and Russia shut his umbrella, looping the handle around his wrist. He didn't look in my direction, and I guessed he was very flustered. I wasn't as embarrassed as I was surprised to hear him ask me to go somewhere--wherever it might be. We went through the city, weaving between the streets, crowds, bright taxicabs, food carts, stoplights, skyscrapers, hard looks, chipped shoulders, broken hearts, rivers of opportunity, and car exhaust. Steam rose from the underground as if there were pools of magma under our feet, and the constant rumbling of the metro made it seem like the city was alive, and that somewhere in the depths lived the Leviathan. Soon enough, the mist stopped and all what was left was the smell of wet asphalt, and pools of water here and there. People strode purposefully, plowing into everything like tanks. He led me through a part of the city that I never was in, where smokestacks, huge lorries and eighteen wheelers, grit and gravel, constant noise, sweat and worry, and the proletariat workers, dominated. He masterfully evaded the large tricks full of toxic coals and slipped past wired gates before they closed. Emerging to the other side, I could see another part of the metropolis, where houses looked like colourful birds nests, all bunched up so there was no room for alleyways. It looked like a richer part of town, where architecture was clearly valued. The moon peeked out from its blanket of clouds, and illuminated the clean roads. We finally reached the place. Lit up by sparse streetlights, the small winding road with trees on either side and encircled by the little houses was like out of a painting. "I

wanted to show you this," Russia whispered after a long time of being silent. "I found it when I went out walking. I thought you would like it."

"It's very nice," it wasn't just nice--it was breathtakingly stunningly beautiful. He took me gently by the hand and steered me in the direction of the walkway. The megapolis buzzed around the little park, the traffic, the constant busyness. But on the walkway we were alone, us and the moon washed streets, so quiet and in perfect equilibrium that it could be written in proise. The only thing more poetic than what I saw would be an Autumn scene. Our feet distorted images in the tiny pools of the clouds tears as we walked though them. Russia seemed very proud that he scavenged around to find this perfect place, perfect time, and perfect weather, the scent of the going rains. The part of the city we were in was all sleeping, and only the moon was our witness. I felt no thought of worry drift in my head. Granted, I didn't feel like I was in the past or the future anymore. I found my present moment, one that millions seek in each of their lifetimes. The budding trees shielded us from spying onlookers, and the little hedgerows bowed down, weighed down by minutely small droplets. The road ended at a large circle of grass, empty, save for a weeping willow in the middle. He stopped there and faced me. The grass was wet and sparkling from the moon's muted and mellow glow. Everything was enveloped in it. Soft shadows swathed everything that the heavenly luminescence didn't. I felt myself holding my breath, waiting for what Russia was going to do or say. It seemed like he wanted to, but either was stalling on purpose, or didn't have the heart to do anything yet. Only then did I notice his leaning forward, slowly and carefully. He stopped right in front of my face, our eyes meeting. Amber and Lavender. His eyes were so captivating. I didn't think anything could ruin the moment.

"Are you cold?" He suddenly asked, his plain words shooting through me like an arrow. "Because I am."

"Um, not really," I wasn't even paying attention to the temperature on my skin. He looked down for a fleeting second. And when I figured that nothing would happen, he swiftly kissed my cheek. After a few moments, I stood on my toes and did the same, and then

encircled his neck with my arms. Smiling slightly, he picked me up and walked, down the moon washed, rain soaked, enchanted street that might've been painted on a canvas.

Rainy Day Spelunking

[image]

I think Germany and Russia should just announce that they're boyfriends now. I mean, seriously. Firstly, I'm tired of retaining their enigmatic skeleton in the closet. It's not like nobody notices or anything. Even my slow and polite dad has been noting things, dropping hints and implicitly asking me complicated questions. At least mom doesn't do that. She already knew from the start.

It was one of those boring weekends where you're stuck inside with your family while the rain patters on your roof and all you want to do is sleep, but you drank six cups of coffee and your older brother forces you to play his favourite board game. Yay for checkers. I lost for the seventh time to Canada, who was keeping score. He drew a sloppy picture of my face and his maple leaf on a sheet of paper, and kept count.

"I win again!" He announced.

"Yay for you," I said sarcastically.

"Hey, where are you going?" He asked me as I stood up.

"I'm hungry," I responded without turning around. Rummaging through the refrigerator was useless. Australia left his half eaten apple in there, then the bugs found out. By bugs, I mean cockroaches. I was never opening the fridge ever again. At least those pesky things didn't go into my room. My good ol' friend, DDT insecticide spray works like magic. I hosed down my whole room, and no vile bug will ever go there. The only person who's more disturbed by them is my dad. Last time he saw one, he threw a chair at it. Then he asked mom if we should fumigate the house or not. Used to these sorts of quirks, mom quickly established that we weren't going to fumigate the house. We would just call an exterminator. I guess I am my dad's son, because both of us don't trust the work done by the guy. Whatever. At least most of them are out. Today I was left alone with Canada and New Zealand while the

rest of my family was out, trying to find another school for Australia. I grabbed a package of toffee cookies from the counter, and went back to the living room. I knew my parents didn't like when I ate outside the kitchen, but they weren't here--so I could just do whatever I wanted. Little New Zealand came down the stairs, yawning intermittently, asked when our parents would get home. Not for another seven hours, I was told. He ate half of my cookies and left to go sleep. I was beyond bored.

"Do you want to play another round?"

"No." I said with my mouth full. He took off his flannel shirt, left in only a black no sleeve. After seeing that I was not going to engage in more checkers playing, he crawled into the couch and dozed off himself. I was left alone, consciously speaking, with my almost empty box of cookies. It didn't take me long to polish them off, or go scrounging around for more food. Too bad that we didn't have school today. My dad was roped into the whole 'we're a family' thing that my mom came up with to expel her boredom. Now I was stuck with my family on the weekends. Canada was dragged off of his work as well. I didn't understand why I had to be at home if I was already an adult. For three years now! I was going to turn twenty one in a few months! And I'm still treated like a child. I crept into the kitchen, already set to climb up to one of the top shelves, when my phone set off. Oh great. Japan. "Hello?"

"Hi America!" She said cheerfully.

"What's up?" I wasn't really in the mood for talking. I was in the mood for eating.

"I wanted to ask if you were interested in going over the project for physics together," oh, yes. The project. Ugh. Japan specifically asked for me as partner for our end of semester assignment. Instead of a final exam, our professor assigned us a project of our choice. It was supposed to be a creative and fun thing, but honestly, I'm kind of lazy when it comes to that. Many of my projects cut corners when it comes to quantitative analysis. I just can't do work. I didn't tell Japan that, either. Well, she's learning the hard way.

"Uh, when?"

"On Monday." She seemed a little irritated at my unwillingness to be invested.

"Okay. Just...not today."

"Alright, on Monday,"

"At three fifteen, in the library," I find wished for her, already setting the phone down and reaching for one of the foodstuffs. "As that's settled, I'll say my goodbye."

"Wait! I haven't finished talking!"

"I'm listening!" I sang.

"Do you want to go see the new art gallery that just opened?" She asked. "Germany found out that the Visual Arts Centre is opening it next week. Russia's going too." Of course he would. "Would you like to come? I'm going." Oh, brother. Art gallery. That sounds like the boringest thing in the whole wide world. Staring at a canvas with paint on it. Awesome. For about one hundred hours. Again, I didn't have the stomach to say 'no'.

"Suuuure." I said slowly.

"Yay! I'll tell Germany. He'll be happy." She exclaimed. "Okay, so see you on Monday in class."

"Bye," I hung up and flopped down onto my stomach on the floor. I hate when people make me a schedule. Because I won't follow it. Did I really care if I failed to do the project? No. Did I want to go look at paint splatters with two quiet stones and a hyperactive cat? No. Did I certainly have to do it to keep up my image and to appear appreciative? Absolutely. As I was about to finally open my packet of crackers, dad calls. This time I had to pick up. "Hi dad,"

"America, is the house clean?" Of course it is. What could go wrong here, ever? And that is always his first question over the phone.

"Yes,"

"Okay, good. We're coming home, stuck in a bit of traffic. Ask

Canada to take out the ham from the freezer. He can bake it if he knows how."

"Alright, I'll ask."

"Don't burn the house down." He hung up. Why did everyone have to call me? Why couldn't I eat peanut butter crackers in peace? I snatched the box of crackers and went to wake my brother. That was a whole set of dangers in itself. I had to prod him for one whole minute to wake him up. He wasn't really happy with that.

"Whaaaaaat do you neeeeeeed." He groaned.

"Dad wants you to make food," I plopped down next to him and opened my crackers. He eyed me with disdain.

"Why am I going to make food if you're eating right now?"

"Listen," my speech was muffled on account of my mouth being full. "I am really stressed out right now."

He leaned his head on his hand. "And how so?"

"My partner wants me to do work, and I have to go to some art gallery later this week." I said the word 'art gallery' in the stupidest way possible. He sighed and mashed his face into a pillow.

"I would've liked to go," he said wistfully, his voice slightly audible by the pillow. "Sounds like it might be interesting."

"Can you go make dinner already?"

"Yes," he stood up, threw on some appropriate clothing, and left to take out the meat from the freezer. Meanwhile, I perused my phone and ate. I made sure that the crumbs landed back in the box, or dad might throw a fit if he saw them. He thought it was because I threw crumbs around was the reason we had infestations of bugs. Unfortunately, no, it was because of another reason. And I was bored again. Even though I loved my phone, it could be sometimes annoying. The smell of roasting ham soon filled the room, and even though I just shoved a whole packet of peanut butter crackers down my throat, I felt my mouth water. My fantasizing was cut short by

my brother's scratchy voice. "America! Can you go get me some spices from the basement?" Canada shouted from the kitchen.

"No!" I yelled back. I didn't want to go spelunking down in the basement. It's way too dark in there. There isn't even a light switch.

"America!" He said with a strained note, making me heave off of our couch.

"Alright, alright!"Still growling, I went down into our small basement. "Its too dark."

"Your precious phone has a light," my brother reasoned. I hate when he does that. I didn't switch on my phone light, and preferred to just open the door to let the brightness in. The basement was divided into a spice and wine cellar as well as a collection of tin cans, plastic bottles, and other paraphernalia that was totally useless, but we kept. For some reason. I rummaged around in the dark, knocking over vanilla bean and cinnamon sticks. I also found an interesting little picture of my family when I was a little baby. What it was doing here in the cellar was a question. Eh, whatever. I finally was able to finish my adventure, smash a glass canister of cloves, swear like nobody heard me (nobody did), and trip up the stairs.

"Here," I gasped as I came up into the kitchen. Canada grabbed the thing without even thanking me. "Hey, did you forget something?"

"Thank you, America." He said sarcastically, and then turned back to the meat. Satisfied, I went back into the living room and took a closer look at the photo. Boy did my dad look better in this picture. At least he was smiling naturally. Mom didn't change much, actually. Of course Canada and I did. Australia and New Zealand weren't born yet. In the background, where before the shadows of the basement shrouded it, was a painful reminder of the real and horrible truth of my happy life. Wide eyes, unsure stance, and in a tasteful summer dress stood Portugal. Or should I say, my real mother. Well, this isn't to be shown to my dad. I wondered if he knew, that I knew the real truth. It wasn't a matter of if my parents knew--because it was. I'm so afraid that if my dad does put two and two together, I'll have to sever ties with my adopted mom, brothers,

and to an extent, father. That's why I keep secrets. I'd hold on to Germany and Russia's secret till I died. That's why I keep everyone's secrets as if they were my own, because I understand, or in this case, fear, the consequences. I guess I was too absorbed into the picture that I didn't realise that the rest of my family had come, since I snapped out of my trance at the click of the door. I desperately looked for a place around to hide the picture, but I was too slow. My wet and frustrated dad strode into the room and was about to say something when he saw me and the photo in my hands. Even from the back it looked dated, and my family wasn't one that necessarily kept photos albums. He pursed his lips tightly, his chai bronze eyes narrowed, but he then turned his back to me, and proceeded to take off his black trench coat as if nothing was wrong. It might've been the fact that mom and Australia came into the house.

"Ah, good evening," he smiled to Canada. "How's dinner?"

"Coming along," the other replied. "Almost finished."

"Good," he went into the kitchen. My mom hugged me in greeting, and Australia sat next to me. I stuffed the photo under a pillow and hoped that the day would end soon. I wish I didn't even go down to the basement. The ham didn't taste as good as it should've been, and the salty looks that my dad threw at me didn't help. People beg, cry, and try so hard to be like me, but right now, I wish I was someone else. Anyone else. Because when you unravel the ball of yarn, the other end is always ruffled.

Illusions and Phantasms

[image]

After I showed Germany the nice little park, he was determined to find a place that was even better. Sometime last week he had told me about a new exhibition of art opening up on campus and asked me if I'd like to go. I was a bit picky with what I liked, but I didn't decline, and he seemed very happy that I accepted his offer. It had finally stopped raining, and many of the students were spending as much time as possible outside. Iceland and I were sitting outside under the lush pines in our courtyard, talking about stuff. Work, weather, other insignificant small talk, the usual. Iceland liked to wrap up the conversation by asking me when I was going to marry Germany. My usual response would be pinching the back of his neck till he abated. And repeat that cycle forever. That's the extent of my friendship with Iceland. Not that he's a bad person, just annoying sometimes. He's told me a bunch of times that I'm his only real friend, and it was understandable, since not many people ice fish, live on Skyr yogurt, and herd goats. He told me that he finally chose a major, and was going to go for Geology. I wished him luck with his rocks. He wasn't really interested in going to see the arts exhibition, since he had to both catch up in work and he didn't like it anyway. I would agree on that, but I didn't voice my complaint. The exhibition was to open tomorrow night, and Germany had been able to rope in Japan, who had talked America into going as well.

"So at what time is this thing again?" Iceland picked at the bark of our tree.

"You want to go now?" I teased.

"No. Just asking."

"Tomorrow, at about eighteen thirty."

"That's late," he commented. "Really."

"It's after many tutoring and after school activity sessions. Convenient."

"Who would want to see art," he said the word 'art' with disdain. I shrugged in reply, but I said nothing. A wind came through the pines, chilling after the warm bout back in February. It made my shoulders rise involuntary, and Iceland pressed himself closer to the trunk. "It's way too cold,"

"Didn't you live in iceberg land?" I asked in a cocky tone.

"Uh, don't you live in snow land too?" He snapped back, but not in an aggressive tone. I've not seen Iceland get angry very much. He was almost like a glittery icy lake. Half frozen, calm, and unruffled. I sometimes wished that I had his nonchalant attitude, calmness inside, and the ability to bounce back from a scorching remark. I felt that inside me, a fire roared, one that only got satisfied after I released it. Even the slightest brush stroke could trigger my firestorm, and other was no way to know who would get caught under it. I still haven't recovered from my wracking guilt over Japan. Even though it seemed that she did.

I continued to talk to not seem like I dropped the conversation. "We don't always have snow,"

"See? We don't always have ice everywhere," he reasoned. "And it's not the temperature. It's the wind."

"Wind makes all the weather," I parroted my father's phrase. He would say to dress for the breezes, not based on how cold it would be. With this, he seldom ever got sick.

"Definitely does," Iceland nodded. "Hey, what time is it? I have absolutely no idea."

I looked at my old wristwatch. "Soon to be seventeen,"

"Ah, great. I should probably start my chemistry work." He heaved himself up and left. "It's gotten to be hard. Atomic valance is now in my dreams. Last night I dreamed of being chased by hydrogen atoms." After he saw me laugh, he shook his head. "I'm serious!"

"I never have dreams of being chased by essays, even though it plausible," Again, I used Mr. UK's word of the day. It might be stupid and repetitive to do that, but I felt more confident in my own speech and writing when he did that. Not that I told anyone I needed help. Just....implicit gratitude. After Iceland left, I dozed off for a bit, only to be awoken by a dumb comment, courtesy of America, and the stream of responses from Japan. By the time I decided to leave myself, it became dark and I headed upstairs to where Iceland made a huge mess with all of his papers. He was scrunched up over his homework, and didn't move till he finished his poor job. He slithered off of his chair and moped into the kitchen, where I decided I would make something instead of going down to the dining hall. I didn't feel in a good mood to be in an echoing and loud hall, being pestered on how my day went. Iceland appreciated my cooking enough to scoff down everything I gave him. He wasn't picky with his food. He pushed a chair over to me, sat down, and laid his head on the counter. "Well, hello." I prodded him with the end of my spoon.

"What?" He looked at me. "I just want to see what you're making."

"Food," I chopped up miscellaneous vegetables and put them in a pan. "Nothing special."

"Okay, I'm going to watch you make 'food' then." He stared at my hands as I continued to cook. Soon after I cut up an array of tomatoes, eggplant, pepper, cucumber, and some others, I brushed them all into a sizzling pan in one stroke of the knife. Iceland looked at them longingly. If I didn't feel like making a lavish meal, it would always be simple vegetables simmered in sunflower oil. Not many people know how simple and quick this seemingly decadent meal is to make. If arranged on a platter nicely, it could make a great vegan substitute for a main course. I didn't eat heavy meals after eighteen o'clock, since I am accustomed to eating more during the midday or even breakfast. I could beg to differ for America. I've never seen anyone eat so much before going to bed.

After that train of thought, I advise not to think of what happens next.

I couldn't ignore Iceland's stare. "Hungry?"

"No, duh." He rolled his bright red eyes. "I didn't know you'd take this long."

"How about you help, then it might be shorter," he grumbled in response to my remark, but slithered off of the counter and set our laughably minuscule table with its slim little legs and thin top. It looked like it belonged to a fancy cafe rather than a university dormitory. At least the plates that were provided for us were high quality porcelain, and the silverware was real silver, unlike the brass and nickel ones in restaurants (you would think they'd be silver, but no.) I couldn't set the dish on the table, so we had to drag some binders over to the spare chair to make another table. I didn't like the little light hanging over my head as I ate, because it cast a shadow over my food. We ate in total silence, and then went to bed equally in silence. I guessed that we both had exhausted our vocabulary and want to speak.

The next day was pretty boring, except when Japan almost lit the classroom on fire with her steel bar when she cut it at the wrong angle. That was about the most exciting thing that happened. Germany was already all over me at fifteen o'clock. Apparently, I had a reputation of being late to social outings and organisations. How I did was a mystery. About twenty minutes before the exhibition opened, he dragged me away from my work and planted me in the already forming line of people.

"See? There's a line already!" He pointed to the two people standing there.

"Okay, okay, you were right. I was wrong. Happy?" I took out my phone and connected to another digital version of my essay. The perks of doing your essay online.

"Yes. Matter of fact, I am." He stood right next to me, peering

occasionally at my phone from the side, since he couldn't over my shoulder. Japan came shortly, wearing a light blue blouse and a long skirt, very much appropriate for an arts exhibition. I wish I could say the same for America. He was wearing a bright purple dress shirt with sequins and glitter, an outrageously bright green tie and a feathered hat, as well as pink framed sunglasses. Basically awful, what can I say. He must've seen the look on my face, because he turned to me, smiling.

"Hi Rus," he waved as he approached. "Like my look?"

"Most definitely not." I raised my eyebrows. "Do you actually like being stared at?"

"Sure. Why not?" He turned around in a full circle. "People love my outfits."

"Riiiiight," Germany nodded slowly. I had to crack a smile.

"Not everyone has such large confidence like you," I pointed out. It felt like even Japan's outfit was muted by his radiant clothes. Let's not even mention my choice of tan slacks and black dress shirt. We waited for about five more minutes, and soon we were inside the strangest looking building. From the outside, it looked just like every other gothic style hall. The interior brick walls were all painted black, and numerous skylights pierced the darkness of the windowless rooms. Walkways were illuminated by tiny strips of LED lighting on either side.

"Aren't these beautiful?" Germany pointed to a white canvas with shapes and lines in all different hues of orange and blue.

America, who looked even more eccentric than the paintings, nodded. "Of course." He waved us over to a particular painting with shades of blue, red, and pink. The shapes were painted into rough stars and vertical stripes. "This....is my masterpiece."

"Ew," I automatically responded.

"Erm...very nice," Germany smiled a bit too widely. Japan eagerly nodded as well. It was as clear as day to see how Japan was trying

to impress the young American. At first, I thought it was quite humorous to see somebody fall head over heels to just gain other's attention. As soon as that drifted into my head, I was suddenly so conscious on how I behaved around Germany. Did I do that? I certainly felt like I did. I was glad that the lights were so dim that nobody could see together blush on my face. I was never taught to hide my feelings like contraband, and I never learned to fake a smile, appear interested, or be sympathetic towards someone else's woe. Japan and America were on the far left of the gallery, looking at a particularly weird sculpture made of recycled plastic. "Do you like the place?" Germany materialised next to me and clutched my arm.

"It's very nice," I whispered back. Not many people had come, and I wasn't a fan of attention. In the half light, I saw the flash of his smile.

"I knew you'd like it. Even if you're not very artsy."

"Correction: I'm not artsy at all." I unbuttoned the topmost pin on my shirt. My neck felt constricted in the tight collar. "But I appreciate your efforts. I still like...whatever this is." I pointed to a random painting.

He giggled at my response. "I always have the nagging feeling of having to outperform everyone. Even you,"

"Well, you have," I answered. "I am surprised that you went out of your way to find this time, when I stumbled upon the little park by chance."

"Many of the best things happen by pure chance,"

"What are you implying at?" I smiled.

"Oh, I'm not saying that we met by chance. That kind of twist of fate could never be just chance."

"Oh my little philosopher, threading in and out of intertwining theory and reality, always judging unalloyed data with arrant luck. Both funny and inexplicable, at the same time so sweet and simple.

How can you be so sphinxlike and modest at the same time? How do you and your quiet demeanour of natural curiosity sway me off my feet so effectively?" I took his hand gently.

"I'm afraid I myself cannot answer those questions," he looked down, blushing even more than me. "I've never noticed any of that in me."

"Well, I do."

"I wish I had your appalling strength of character, unbending will, and the ability to see clearly into a future that you'll follow till the end. I wish I had a solid foundation of my set of core values, intrinsic morals, and the poweress and capacity to maintain firm ground on what I believe is right, even if it means to shake your head and bite the bullet. Even though you're a little blunt and can be stubborn, I see that you're a reserved and smart man who will silently stand for centuries to protect the people he trusts. That's what I see, and what I love in you."

"I never expected to be all that," I laughed.

"You are. And more." And in the middle of the dimmed lights, the slow and controlled murmurs coming from others around us, the feeling as though nobody was actually real, like everything was an illusion, a phantasm, he kissed the middle of my face lightly and smiled.

Ah, it felt like I haven't updated in such a long while. It took a while to write the first half of the chapter. It looked like a lot on my document. As always, thank you everyone for the 4.8K reads!

The Elitist

[image]

To be frank, I didn't expect Russia to be so poetic with his words. I was even more appalled at his ability to see right through me, in ways I've never even seen myself. He didn't mention our little talk afterwards to Japan and America, who asked where we've been.

"Looking at more five year old drawings," Russia responded. America rolled his eyes.

"But mine doesn't look that bad, right?"

"Sure," Russia smiled. "Keep telling yourself that." America pouted, but regained his carefree step soon enough when we reached the end of the gallery, where there were mostly strange and otherworldly sculptures here and there out on an open terrace. We stalled near the doors.

"Well, that was nice," Japan said, fanning herself with the map of the exhibition. "Though they could turn in air conditioning. The spotlights emit a lot of heat."

"Mhmm," Russia nodded in passive agreement, even though he had a fur hat on. "I felt a little elitist just going around and staring at paint on walls."

"Really? It's a cultural thing!" America turned around, taking off his feathered hat and fanning himself. "Everyone does it at least once!"

"Well, I looked at paintings before. Just, they were expressions something. People, an event, a scene,"

"It can portray emotion," Japan interjected.

"Yes, well..." it see me like Russia wanted to agree, but didn't. We walked out onto the large terrace with many plants and sculptures everywhere. The night had swallowed the sun already, and the

numerous lights around campus glimmered in the dark. "...as you might have noticed, I'm not used to this type of lifestyle."

"I get it," America perched his sunglasses on top of his head. If he was going to be serious, his outfit didn't help him. Half of the people around us seemed impressed, others, like Russia, were wearing expressions ranging from pure disgust to 'is that guy seriously wearing a bird costume?'. "I mean, I'm sympathetic to your change of environment. Not that I can relate." We talked a bit about grades, exams, and which teacher was most boring while the night became blacker, and the stars came out. The string lights came to life, and sparkled like fairies around us.

"Who would take history?" Japan asked. We were in the middle of discussing the subject. "As a major, of course."

"Only more history professors!" America answered enthusiastically. "Nothing out there for that."

"It's important and all, but to study it that deeply? Never," Russia agreed.

"Speaking of deeply, what do you all think about seminar?"

"I've heard of it from many, many people. But they never say what it is," Russia tipped his head to the side. "Do you know?"

"Unfortunately, I take it." America sighed. "It's very boring. We've gotten so low that our professor assigns us petty 'friendship between people' essays. Most of my classmates are fourth years, and they just don't care. My roommate is in that class too. He uses it for sleep."

"It's that boring?" I asked, incredulous.

"It gets worse towards the end." he nodded. "At first, there's no grade. Then, in the middle, we start to get grades. Too bad for all our fourth years. They have this stupid grade and their end of year project."

"Sounds tough," Japan frowned.

"Well, you are in the best university in the world," he told her. "So it

has to be harder than others. Mind you, I'm already struggling."

"You don't look it," Russia commented lightly.

"Looks Rus," he pointed to him. "Can be deceiving."

"I got that much," Russia lightly pushed away America's hand. "You switch topics like I switch my mood."

"At least you've admitted it," the other shrugged. "And yes, I do. It's boring to just drone on about one."

"Understandable," he looked over at me and sighed. "But I'm also not very great in English."

"Failing?"

"No. Just confused. I've been given a topic after much irritation. It's on Green Energy. Mr. UK said its both trending and I'm interested in engineering anyway. I guess it's a win win situation."

"Plausible," I offered. Russia let out a small laugh. Of course, Japan had to coo quietly.

"And you, Germany?" America questioned, politely and surprisingly ignoring Japan. "Topic? Since we're on it."

"It might not be as great as Russia's, and you just were talking bad about the subject," I cautioned.

"It's history, isn't it?" America gave me a look.

"It's history," I confirmed. America sighed, and Japan shook her head so hard that her ears flapped. Only did Russia support my decision. That is, firstly, because I told him beforehand. More and more students joined us out on the terrace, and even though it was only about twenty o'clock, I sensed Russia becoming fidgety and nervous. He didn't like people either. America was the master of the game here. He roped in another random girl and started taping to her like they've been friends for many years. She didn't look exactly offended that he picked her out of the group. On the contrary, she excitedly started to yammering on with him. She was dressed in a

frilly dark blue dress with her shoulders showing above the sleeves. USSR would scoff at that kind of dress. After a while of just staring and listening to the pair, I found out that the girl's name was Argentina, and she liked to dance, but that was about it. Japan pursed her lips tightly, but said nothing, instead flattening her ears and occasionally giving Argentina a harsh glare. Things became awkward when she decided to bring over her two brothers, North and South Korea. No, that wasn't the awkward part. Along with them was Italy. This time, I assumed, in one of his father's white suits and an irritating smell of men's perfume, he definitely changed.

"Oh, hello Germany!" He waved to me as he approached. "I never expected to see you here."

"Y-yeah," I shook his extended hand. It was noticeably warmer than mine, and I thought my hands felt clammy, because he automatically brushed it against his pant leg. His other hand was occupied by a glass filled with water.

"So, how are you?" He looked up at Russia and nervously smiled. Russia gave him a little frown back. "And who is this?" He leaned on the divider between the drop below and the terrace.

"Erm, doing okay." This was about as interesting as our conversation was going to get. "This is Russia....he's my frie-,"

"Boyfriend." America cut in for me. How random and awfully unexpected.

"No." Russia automatically responded, even though it was very obvious that he was lying.

"Right, keep telling yourself that," America smiled and continued to talk with Argentina.

"I hate you," Russia growled at him.

"I know." The other rolled his eyes playfully. "Keep on with your conversation."

"Oh, I was just asking, you know, curious," Italy shook his hands. "I

mean, we haven't seen each other in a long time."

"Mhmm." Was all I could say. Italy talked a little with Russia, but the other seemed to evade speaking, answering in court sentences if he could say, 'yeah', 'okay', 'yes', or 'no', as well as appearing uninterested. Italy didn't take the hint, and just kept on his spiel. Russia beckoned me over, and wrapped his protective arm around my shoulders. While I loved when he did that, Italy's gaze deterred me from enjoying it. I looked up at him, and tried to communicate my problem as discreetly as I could. His face was half shrouded by the shadows made from the terrace string lights, but I could see his eyes flash with understanding. Oh, good. I finally let my shoulders down, when Russia suddenly pressed himself tighter to me. Italy just kept on staring, the water from his mouth dribbling down his chin and his eyes widening. This is humiliating.

"Um, I guess I'd better go then," he babbled hurriedly. "So...yeah, uh, see you around," he whisked around so fast that he even dropped his glass. Thank goodness it was made of shatterproof material. "Sorry!" He yelled from the crowd, already dissolved in the throng.

"Russia!" I said as Italy scampered away.

"What?"

"Didn't you understand what I meant?"

"I did. You wanted the conversation to be over."

"Yes, but....not in that way," I shook my head. "Now he might just-,"

"Spread rumours?" Russia raised his eyebrows. "Look, I'm kind of tired of being wishy washy with this gossip stuff. If they want, they can talk behind my back. They won't dare say anything upfront. And, to say, isn't he your childhood *friend*? It would be morally wrong."

"Not the point..." I protested, even though I saw sense with his argument. "I don't think people think about morals nowadays."

In reply, he brushed my arms. "Let's just leave this place, okay? I

know you're not enjoying this either." He raised his voice and called to America. "Hey! Me and Germany are leaving,"

"Have fun together!" He teased.

"Hope he chokes on a doughnut," Russia hissed as we, or should I say he, pushed through the crowd. I could finally breathe normally as we left the crowded terrace full of people. I definitely preferred to be alone with a book rather than socialise with a bunch of strangers. The chances of a book asking about your personal life are relatively low compared to a starry eyed, ever curious university student. Our lonely footsteps on the inlaid walkways echoed across to the ears of the terrifying mythical beasts, valiant heroes, and sly snakes, all encased in stone, frozen in time. By this time of the season, our breath didn't billow up in the air, but I still felt the last cruel chill bite before it would disappear, and let spring take over. Winter never liked giving up its domain of the world, but eventually it would. I yawned intermittently, and Russia seemed to think I was bored. "Don't like my company?"

"Oh," I had to stop mid sentence to yawn again, much to Russia's humour. "No, I'm not bored at all. Just....tired."

"Hm, yes. It is late. But not that late," he looked up at the sky. "Don't go to sleep that early. You'll get really bad nightmares after you toss and turn through the night."

I had to disagree. "I wouldn't think so,"

"Suit yourself," he lowered his gaze back down. "But I usually do."

"We're very different," I argued. "So it mig-,"

"We're also pretty similar," he cut me off. It was his thing to cut people off when he thought necessary. I got used to it already. The clock struck nine at night, and I bid Russia a goodbye. He seemed a little nervous just leaving me, and warned me of nightmares. Shaking his caveats and exhortations off, I quickly hugged him and left. He kept staring at me as I disappeared around the corner, a slight frown painted on his face. After a few moments, he too turned away and trudged back, most likely retracing our steps. I

hastily made my way up to my dorm room, got ready for bed, and was staring up at the ceiling in twenty minutes. In some degree, Russia was right about the time it took to actually sleep. I felt wide awake, and my brain did not want to let my conscious slip. I was even more irritated when Finland stumbled into the room at prime time midnight and made a lot of noise around. Fortunately, he didn't turn the lights on, but he did mumble to himself and laughed at his own jokes. I wish I heeded to Russia's advice now. I'm not one with stubborn pride and ego; I know when somebody else is right. At around two third in the morning (I heard the clock outside) I fell into a fitful sleep. Mists and shadows swirled in my mind till a clear picture surfaced. On top of a huge high rise building in a teeming metropolitan centre was a quiet meet up. An elitist party.

Women in slim strapless red dresses moved along with men in shiny tuxedos, and huge glittering vases of a thousand roses stood here and there, amongst the low glass tables. Everywhere on carved gold platters, were brilliant crystalline thin wine glasses with delicate stems, filled up with rich sparkling wine form Bordeaux, low level couches made of soft velvet cushions, and in the distance, everything was covered with the sparkle of pure diamond. The shiny tiles of opal and shell were covered in soft rich red carpets that muffled the steps of the slow dancers.

The calm reunion was a terrifying facade. Unnerving in the picture was everyone's eyes. All of them were gleaming with subtle hate of one another, deciding who to smother first. The Elitist party suddenly turned into a subtle assassination lookout. Though nobody moved, the atmosphere of quiet classical music turned to a dreadful symphony of slow suspense. A four tier chandelier hovered over the scene, waiting to droop down like in every murder mystery, and even though people still sipped their wine, casually made small talk, danced lightly to the music, it was as if everyone knew what was about to happen. The air was thick with it and the smell of perfume. Although to the regular onlooker, things weren't going to be changing anything anytime soon. So why not enjoy the party? After all, the cheese and escargo is magnificent. Lazy chips of ice moved slowly in a cold martini glass, while the owner smoked a huge Cuban cigar. It's always quiet before the storm. Pearly smiles, starch white gloves, neatly polished an leather loafers, the whole

satire of being together and helping one another was starting to show its face beneath the blue and red porcelain opera mask.

In the midst, I saw him. He was in a clean black suit with a deep red tie. A cigarette was casually dangling in between his middle and forefinger. His sharp and knowing stare penetrated each end every movement, and nothing went by his gaze. Because of the wreath of smoke around him, he looked intimidating, and not many dared approach him. The well mannered and slick man could turn into a fire storm when touched. A brilliant thick steel watch that looked worn and battered hung on his wrist. It reminded him of his days of hard work and constant pain. There was none now. A small but distinct scar decorated his chin, and he still couldn't quite fit into this frivolous society of the Elite.

"How can they be so blind?" He never moved his lips, but I heard his voice. Low, deep, and threatening. "When will they know to not underestimate the single mind?" He went back to his brooding state, staring out of a grandiose window which gave sweeping views of the metropolis. It used to be where his whole career started. Where he was dragged out of the constant worry of being cold or hungry. He fixed that. Even though I myself wasn't in the picture, he looked up with his foreign but so familiar lavender gaze. "Recognise me?" It was as if he was speaking, but he never moved his mouth. He only smiled. My eyes widened and I shook my head. "Well...I'll tell you. I'm an elitist. I am what happens when ambition drives itself over everything else. I am what happens when shown that my family suffers, I am the pillar." I didn't understand what he was saying. I shook my head and wanted to cry. This was not him. He must've been able to sense what I was thinking, because he smiled. "Germany....don't think I've forgotten you. I am Russia. Just....more enlightened." Before anything else happened, I awoke, and my own world came back. The night still buzzed in my head, even though as soon as my eyes flew open, I forgot everything. Never again will I sleep that early.

A Nightmare For Both Sides

[image]

I never thought that Britian could be this insane. When he told me a job, I thought it might be something with manual labour, manning machinery, or maybe a computing job. Basically, away from interacting with people. I always messed up royally when speaking and presenting. This royal, Britain, thought it would be great if I TAUGHT at his school! Me? Teach children? Granted, these were already adults, but in my eyes, same thing. To make sense of all of this trouble, I had to rewind everything to the beginning.

The next day after I got fired was awful. I woke up by falling off of my bed and onto the floor. My alarm clock rung off the hook and dropped onto my head. Great. Nice start of the day. I drove Kazakhstan to his day care, saw Ukraine and Belarus to school and then went inside to mope around. I waited for Britain's call all morning long, and then when my patience couldn't take it anymore, I left to go work the garden and let the chickens out of their pen. Overwhelming guilt and worthlessness overcame me, and I felt very self conscious of all my actions. I always had the nagging feeling that I didn't deserve anything. It was warmer outside today than it was all week, and the sun smiled to all her subjects on earth. Next thing I knew, I was lying face down in the dirt. I didn't even try to get up, but lifted my head up to survey my surroundings. If somebody saw me now, they might think that I was a moronic and crazy old man with nothing to do. Caramel, Belarus' rooster, came to peck at my ushanka, thinking that I might have corn in it. I don't like to say my favourite things, but the best chicken in the flock was a simple white chicken named Sunny that really loved me for some reason. She'd always try to hop up on me and knew that I'd always bring food. She looked at me curiously, her little innocent eyes shining, waiting till I gave her food. People can disagree, but chickens are as loyal as dogs. In peacetime, anyway.

Once I had finished herding all of the chickens in, brushed myself off, and smoked two Pobeda cigarettes, I went back into the house.

As I had absolutely nothing to do, so I sat in a chair and absentmindedly stared at the wall. The clock ticking next to me on the wall adjacent was almost soothing, and I felt tired once more. I leaned my head on the wall and sighed, wanting to doze off. My phone ringing was what snapped me out of the trance very quickly.

"Uh, hello," I tried to make my voice sound awake. I didn't even check the caller identification before I picked up. It could've been a telemarketer. I prepared for anything.

"Ah, good afternoon Soviet," Oh, it was Britain.

"Ah, you called...before?" I had no idea if he called while I was outside.

"Yes. Ten times now," he didn't seem very irritated, though. I would've not been a pretty sight if I was on the other end.

"Oh, sorry. I was busy outside, and, ah," I felt my words jumble together into an unintelligible pile of bad English. How dumb must I sound on the other end. I didn't need to imagine, since the tiny echo told the whole story.

"No worries. I understood such," he comforted. "I was going to continue our conversation that we had yesterday."

"Ah, yes. The conversation." I nodded.

He continued after clearing his throat loudly. "So. I think I've found a very good job for you. Great benefits, high salary, and a very successful track."

"Mhmm,"

"What is your experience in...Ah, how can I put this....teaching?"

"Well, I have taught my employees at my factory...and with relative success, yes, because of the working conditions, most made out fine."

"Excellent," he said, seemingly relieved. I didn't know how this related to what he was going for. "Are you comfortable with

moving?"

"Permanently?"

"Oh, no. Just for the work week." He said hurriedly. "At the least."

What could possibly go wrong? I didn't want to say no. I play my cards to my advantage. "Sure."

"I know you have young children. I'm sure there us something I can do about it. Because the job will be on site. Here, at my island. I have a variety of schools to choose from if you ever will need." He paused. "Does that sound fine?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Nope. I was lost with what he wanted to do.

"So you do applied maths and physics, right,"

"I'm certified. Haven't done much of it, though."

"Oh, good. Certainly being certified is good." He was pleased with my answer. "Unfortunately, at my school two of my professors just retired. Coincidentally, in those fields. Before I could file an announcement, I heard of your very regrettable situation and decided to maybe give you a chance? Would you, Soviet, be interested in teaching at my university?"

This time, I was surprised. Shocked. Just appalled. That doesn't mean I'm going to say 'I will think it over'. I am an opportunist now. "Yes, why not?" Though I tried to sound confident, my voice shook.

"Ah, I knew you would accept! Marvellous. Maybe you could come here, or I could come to you somehow to discuss logistics and all of your other questions?"

"Definitely."

"I was thinking as soon as possible. Maybe tomorrow, at my estate, at nine o'clock?"

"Sounds fine." I quickly scribbled down the date and time, along with the address he dictated out. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, good day," he hung up. Though it wasn't what I expected, it was still a good title. It wasn't until the next hour when I started to think everything though and my mind began to process all of my quick and rash decisions. Wait, I can teach young adults? Is that even possible? I didn't have much patience with my own self, much rather with a bunch of sarcastic intellectuals. Leaving the door open, I went to go smoke outside. I almost inhaled the whole cigarette when a thought came in my head. My *son* is at that school. With the career path he wants to pursue, I just might be his professor. I was dumbfounded beyond belief. On one hand, I need a job. Secondly, I couldn't pass up the benefits and the salary. On the other, to see, interact, and teach not only other students, but my own children....it was all too confusing. At around sixteen o'clock, Belarus came home and I told her everything. Her eyes glittered with happiness when I said that.

"Yay! That would be great," she clapped. "For you, papa, and for us. You could work there, see Russia, and we could too."

"If you say so..." I felt a bit more confident with Belarus agreeing and looking very happy. It lightened my mood. I left her outside with the chickens while I drove and picked up Kazakhstan from his day care. Ukraine was already home by then, and obviously filled in by Belarus, because he too was excited.

"Papa, Belarus is right. It would be good."

"Yes, but..."

"You didn't decline, right?" Ukraine's eyes went round. I usually need these types of conversations with a negative response.

"No, but I didn't think anything through, either." That didn't really stop them from yammering on the whole night. At least they were smiling. It was too long since they smiled. Even I did so more when I was their age. Goes to show how responsible I am. I had to drive through the night to arrive the next day at Britain's estate. Shouldn't be that hard.

Alright. That was pretty hard. I rolled up into Britain's driveway at four o'clock, at the crack of dawn. I didn't want them to think I was insane, so I drifted off in the car till seven thirty. I was awoken by Britain's son, who rapped the glass of my car. He thought I was some homeless man. Very funny, hilarious indeed. After some explaining, millions of apologies from him, I trudged up their doorstep, and was greeted by France. She was very enthusiastic, and piled a plate of pastries for me. She made me eat all of them while I waited for Britain. He came down shortly, wearing a bright pink bathrobe and light blue slippers. He was very surprised and embarrassed to see me. Little did he know, I didn't actually particularly care.

"Ah, good morning Soviet," he smiled nervously. "Ahm, sorry for this. I didn't realise you'd come so early,"

"That's alright. It's mostly I am afraid to be late," I shook my head in response. He quickly dashed upstairs after he exchanged words with his wife in French. Their eldest son kissed his mother goodbye and drove off on his pickup truck. Britain came down in his usual repertoire, and at down opposite of me with his coffee at hand. In his other, a stack of papers.

"Would you like some?" France asked me kindly, holding a lot of coffee. I politely declined, but she poured me the black liquid anyway, setting down milk and cream as well.

"So, the logistics," Britain started. "I assume you would like the job?" France hovered over her husband for a little bit, and then also left for her workplace.

"Yes, of course. I'd be happy to." I thought this through the night while I drove. I realised that I wouldn't get a second chance, and I would take this seeming opportunity of a lifetime.

"I normally don't take in people without a teaching certification, but...I think I can make exceptions here," he gave me a smile. "Since I know you, and you have a...Ah, applied maths certificate, correct?"

"Yes," I pulled up an electronic copy of it from my phone.

"Oh, good," he seemed impressed at my readiness to present documents. In truth, I always was paranoid that documents would disappear or rip or burn, so I held three electronic and ten paper based copies at hand. You can't be too prepared. "Now, the process goes like this: you'll have about two to three classes a day. Two undergraduate and a graduate class. You might even have a PhD student as well, but that will be discussed later. Here is a model timetable," he gave me a schedule of the previous professor's. It looked relatively simple. An undergraduate class in the morning, a graduate intensive class in the afternoon along with a low intensity undergraduate, and an evening PhD student advisory.

"It looks good," I handed him back the schedule. "The timetable does not worry me. It is my-,"

"Housing. Children." Britain finished for me. "Yes. Here is what I came up with." He told me what he thought. My two children would be enrolled in a British private school, and Kazakhstan could be taken care of partly by France, partly by a local day care. There was no cost (except for the day care) and it was relatively simple to follow. I would only need to find housing, while Britain found me a little apartment to rent out. Perfect. I actually had little tears in my eyes when he finished. "Something wrong, Soviet?"

"Oh, no," I smiled. "I'm just...happy. That you took time to help me,"

"Well, it's my job. To help people," he seemed flustered by my thanks. "You're very welcome." He was very shocked when I suddenly hugged him very tightly. There were still many roadblocks and tweaks to iron out, but I knew that now things would go smoother. I would finally have a grounding pillar in my life. Funny how I never used to have one.

Am I Surprised?

[image]

I would be taking a new class this semester. Actually, many new classes. One was Applied mathematics for engineers. It sounded very interesting, and the professor put out a syllabus. It was very precise and concrete, and very understandable. Much better than most others, and I could follow it. America joked that the professor might be like me. I waved him off. The professor was new to the school, and nobody knew his name. Later in the evening, I printed out the schedule and each of us critiqued each other's choices of classes.

"He's new." America commented as he looked through my timetable. "And by the way he structured his syllabus, strict."

"Well, we all know you're used to loosey-goosey." Germany giggled.

"Where did you ever get that phrase?" America looked at him woefully.

"I don't forget my colloquial terms," was what the other said. "You taught them."

"But this guy 'runs a much tighter ship'." I caught on.

America facepalmed. "I hate when you people watch my movies and then quote them constantly,"

"Well, we're learning English!" Germany and I chimed together.

Iceland snorted under the table loudly when we said it. Japan turned pink trying not to laugh. It was the night before the second semester. We bid each other good night, Iceland and I leaving to Pine, America to Cedar, Germany to Oak, and Japan to Redwood.

"Good luck with your classes," Iceland said at breakfast time the next day. He and I were sitting and finishing breakfast. I opted for simple oatmeal and buttered bread. Lavish breakfast like America's made me sick inch stomach. Iceland was eating yogurt and dry meat with chives. We all had mostly new classes except for engineering, drama, dance, and German. All the rest was new. And I didn't have to take any more English. I was relieved.

"You too," I waved to him. We were almost the last people there. It was part of our 'avoiding people' plan. The alarm on my watch buzzed, telling me I was soon to be late. I quickly packed up, and left for the class. I wondered what we would do. Going down to the mathematical building, where glass made up much of the architecture, I passed down the hall to one of the last classrooms. It was another small class; there was only five students, including me. I sat down on one of the lab style tables and we waited. All of the students were older than me, looking like fourth and third years were there. If I predicted correctly, there were four fourth years and one second year. I think. The professor came in and my jaw dropped. In a simple grey overcoat with a thick black belt, black leather gloves, and old black boots stood a man whom I didn't expect. Papa?

"Good morning!" He smiled, his eyes scanning us. They widened a little when his gaze travelled over me, but he gave no sign of recognition. His smile was wide and nervous.

"Hi," our class droned. I assumed they didn't care who taught the class. They maintained their bored expressions. The morning classes were always slow.

"So, I hope you have all looked through the syllabus, because that is our official schedule," he wrote on the board with a blue ink marker. He wrote his main points up on the board in rough but

loopy cursive, and then turned to us. It seemed like he was getting himself together. "Ahm, why don't you all tell me your names, so that I can...get to know you better?" None of the students really noticed his fumbles, and all stood up one at a time, and answering in a bored voice. I was left last. He turned to me. "And you?" His green eyes bored into me. They looked foreign and strange, like glass from a shattered beer bottle.

I couldn't find my voice. "Uh, my name's Russia. I'm a first year..." I stuttered out.

"Great," he nodded, hooding his eyes. "Now, what we'll be doing..." and that went on for the whole class. I was dumbfounded and confused. What was father doing here? What? Why? And most importantly, how? Also, why did he act like he never saw me before? The whole class passed by very quickly, and before I knew it, the students were all leaving. I didn't even have time to digest all of the information slamming into me. As the students, passed, I could see that they looked much happier and excited than before. Either to them the class was interesting, or they couldn't wait to get out.

"Bye mister," the second year said, swinging her messenger bag over her shoulder.

"Have a good day..." he tried to remember her name.

"Denmark," she giggled.

"Denmark," he repeated. When everyone left I was still sitting in my spot, staring at him. He came up to me and sighed. "Hi Russia."

I didn't hold back. "Papa....how?" I gasped. He took my hands, and rubbed the tops with his thumbs affectionately like he used to when I was younger.

"I lost my last job," he said very quickly, looking down. "I didn't want to tell you. So that you wouldn't worry. U.K. found me a job here. I have a certification for applied maths, and they need a professor. I took the job." He looked back up, his eyes guilty and worried.

"What about Ukraine? And Belarus, and Kazakhstan?"

"They're here," he whispered. "Well, not now. Soon, we'll be moving here. It is all planned out."

My eyes involuntary rounded. "Really?"

"Yes, really." He nodded. He stood up and brushed off his coat. "I think you should go now. I wouldn't want you to be late."

I hugged him goodbye. "Bye."

"See you soon." He waved. I dashed out of the class towards the arts building. I had dance next. At least moving to ballet music would clear my head. I was sceptical of taking arts classes before, but I realised they were an excellent filler, and they didn't assign homework. So maybe I've softened to them. Just a little bit. Even though the girl I dance with says that my grip is too strong and that I crush her fingers. Right. As if she doesn't dig her nails into my shoulders and step on my feet. But I seldom complain, since dancing in pairs isn't a usual thing we do. Today we weren't even dancing to ballet, but to tango. I was placed with a different girl this time, and she didn't ever say anything. Good.

I was the first to pack up and leave the class this time. Usually I'm the last. As I came out, I saw Germany leaning against one of the poles that were commonly seen here. He was waiting for me.

"Hi," he smiled as I approached.

"Why are you here so early?" I asked, hugging him.

"I may or may not have class right next to you," he pointed to an adjacent classroom. "I'm taking more painting."

"And how is it going?"

"Bad. At least, that's what my professor thinks."

"They say that?"

"No. Her face says it when she comes to me." He laughed. "How was

your Applied Mathematics? You were very excited for it." I motioned for us to go while we talked.

I scratched my neck. "Yeah...I was..."

"What's wrong? Boring professor?"

"No. Surprising professor."

"In what way?" He looked up at me, his amber eyes flashing with curiosity.

"Let me put it this way. The simple way. The professor is father."

Germany stopped instantly. It was almost comic how he slowly turned around, half opened his mouth, and then chortled and forced a laugh. He did so for five whole minutes straight. "You're kidding." He said seriously.

"No. I don't kid."

"But how?" He scrunched his brow in thought.

"He didn't even say. He said he lost his job and Mr. UK provided him with this one." I rolled my eyes like a rebellious adolescent. "Like that explains it."

"That easily?" He frowned. "It takes years to be able to teach. I'm not even talking about secondary school. Years for elementary, even."

I shrugged. "I don't know. Don't ask me. All I know is that now my father's my teacher."

"I wouldn't want to be you," Germany shook his head. "That must be awkward."

"Very," I agreed, pushing open the dining hall door. We both took some food and went outside, since the weather was becoming nicer every day. It was end of April, signifying the beginning of May. Nature had almost fully awoken by this time, and flowers were in full bloom. Sitting down on a bench near a neat patch of tulips, we

ate silently for a while.

"So your dad's here." Germany looked up at me. "At the university. Never even thought that was possible. I guess now everything is possible."

"Yeah..." I had no comment. I chewed on my buckwheat absently. A really horrible thought came into my head at that moment, and I stopped my chewing. "Um, Germany, do you think father even approves...of, of us?"

"Of us what?" He asked, even though he already knew. I saw it in his eyes. Our relationship.

"Us being...together, you know?" He pursed his lips as I talked.. "Your friend, Italy staring openly at us and Japan giggling behind me is one thing. Father...technically your adopted father...is not hallway gossip and sly looks. It's the real thing. I'm a little afraid of finding out what he thinks of us." I swallowed. "Because I've never defied him before. I don't particularly have the desire to taste his wrath."

"But he already knows," Germany said, calmly and reasonably. "Remember when he showed us the meadow? And when he told us something about trust being dangerous?" He paused and swiped his tongue over his lips quickly. "So he already knows."

"Maybe he thinks we're just friends." I bit my lip and avoided the obvious.

"I think your dad is more observant than you think,"

"But..." I had no more arguments.

"Whatever. No use arguing over something we don't have control over." He sighed. "I wouldn't win an argument with you, any way." He cracked a smile. When I didn't smile back, he rubbed my arm. His hand felt cold against my warm skin. "Are you still worried? I have to tell yo one thing: I won't stop loving you just because of somebody else."

"Mhmm." I said, since I didn't feel like responding with a full 'yes'.

"Oh Russland," he whispered. "Warum bist du so schwierig."

"Weil ich ein schwieriges Leben habe," I said back softly. My throat burned from the urge to cry, and my mouth went salty. He blinked twice, surprised, but then hugged me affectionately. We didn't say anything to each other for the next ten minutes straight, and just sat there, in each other's embrace. The knot of ever present worry in my chest started to untie the longer I had him in my arms. The burning started to ebb away.

Germany probably felt that I was slipping away, and he gently prodded me. "Hey, don't forget that we have an hour lunch break, and that means that it'll end soon."

"Ah, I know." I sighed. "I just feel like there's nothing to worry about with you."

"That's nice to know." He smiled and threw our plates in the nearest receptacle. "I want you to know that without you, I felt infinitely times more in danger. The way you stop worrying about everything, I stop feeling like there is a shadow of the past behind me, and the feeling of constant danger and unpredictability." He kissed my cheek in goodbye. "And I thought I worried a lot. It's bad for your health."

"That's literally what everyone tells me," I laughed. "And yet they're the ones that make me worry."

"Do I?"

"Never,"

He took out his phone and scrolled through it. "I think my exhibition idea worked out as good as swimming in a lightning storm. Why don't we go somewhere else tonight? Like the park you showed me weeks ago?"

"If you want." I shrugged. "I thought the Gallery thing was great."

"If only I'd listened to your advise." He said ruefully. "Maybe it would've been better." Without further telling me anything else, he waved goodbye to me and soon I was in another new class. The

very large classroom with blue walls was divided into part standard class with desks and a blackboard, and the other, four long lab tables with transparent cabinets under them. I sat down at one of the desks, and waited for more people to come. The other three students were chatting on about something. I was mildly surprised when North Korea sat down next to me. His facial expression showed pure boredom, and his almost black eyes were lidded. He had a pair of red wired earphones in that matched the shirt underneath his navy blue straitjacket. He seemed to want to talk to me, but didn't know how to start.

"Um, uh, hi," he said relatively gruffly to me.

"Hello," I responded. "I've....met you before?" The humour in my tone lightened the atmosphere tenfold.

"Yes," he chuckled. "We have. Though I forget where and when." I nodded vigorously in agreement. We both didn't want to remember *that.*

"You also picked this class? Or is it a requirement?" I continued on.

"Eh, my brother said its a relatively okay class. Decent. Like everything else in this bourgeois school." He said flatly. "But, as usual, I had to go to where my brother wants." He rolled his eyes on the word 'brother'.

"Hm, my brother also gets moody every time we don't do something his way." I explained. "So he's always in a bad mood." He let out a quiet huff of laughter.

"That's funny," he gave me a half smile. "I'm usually the one who has to wait it out to get it my way. 'North, we'll do it next time, South really wants this', 'North we don't have time, Vietnam has this', 'No North, Japan needs this, you can wait' or 'North, be quiet, your mother is sleeping and I want to watch my stupid show on Nephrology or something of the sort.' Repeat that cycle on forever."

I stifled a laugh. "Seriously?"

"Don't believe me?" He raised his eyebrows. "Ask my brother. Oh

wait, no, don't. He'll just say, 'No, North is always like that. I apologise for him. He's such a this, this, and this. And I'm South, and I know everything." His voice went high pitched and annoying when he talked about his brother.

"Well, my brother takes his phone, records me doing something, and then dubbs his own commentary on and posts it on his social media page."

"Ugh, don't tell my brother that." North shuddered. "Because he'll definitely do the same."

"I don't tell that story to many people," I said. "So the secret is safe."

"As UK puts it, very good," he smiled. After a pause, he rummaged in his bag and took out a book. "Um, so I've been learning Russian on my own, and I was wondering if you could...I don't know...help me with some words?" He asked hopefully.

"Sure," he passed me the book and I looked though the pages. "Oh, this was my favourite story book."

"I tried to find something easy to read." He showed me a bookmark with a bunch of words on it. "And these are the words I don't really understand."

"Hmm, well this one is actually a name," I scanned though the words. Most of them were names of characters, like Chudo-Udo and Konek-Gorbunok. "Most of these are...just names. Not very translatable. Well, they sort of are. Chudo means a miracle, basically."

"But the thing is supposed to be..."

"Ugly? Yes, it's sort of like satire." I gave a crooked smile. "All of the Russian sarcasm."

"I noticed," he nodded. "Well, thank you, then. If I have anymore, I'll ask."

"Whatever floats your boat." I took America's colloquial phrase. It was even themed to our class. Nautical engineering and theory. It

didn't take long for the professor to come.

"Oh my," North muttered as the professor came in. Another shock for me. This time, our professor was Mr. UK.

"Good day, class." He said warmly to us. "Surprised yet? I used to design ships." His teaching style changed like night to day. His slow and practised method of using the board and droning on went out the window, skylight I should say. He immediately got started on the theory, and said that our final project was going to consist of designing, building an accurate model, and finally constructing a ship roughly twice the size of the model. "In pairs," he assured us. We got started on the introduction and how we would design. I understood that all of the class knew physics and calculus, because of the vast amounts of integrals and motion graphs he used was extensive. He told us that one third of our time would be used for theory, and two thirds application. That suited me just fine. At the end of the class, I was paired up with North, which was lucky because I didn't want to be with someone I didn't really know.

I assumed today was day of nasty surprises, because America was in the last class of the day. This was a light walled class on the third floor, with very big windows stretching from ceiling to floor on all three sides except for the last one where the door was. Each long table could seat about five students and would still have room. Each part of the table had a desktop computer mounted into the flat surface. I didn't talk as I came in. Just stared.

"Hey lo!" He waved to me. I collapsed on the chair next to him.

"Whyyyyyyy." I groaned.

"Why what?" He took his sunglasses off. "Don't like my company?"

"No. There's been too many surprises today."

"Hah, like what? My day has been really boring." He yawned. "The most exciting thing that happened was that a pigeon and I shared my food today." I guessed he didn't care for respect, because he was eating some kind of chips in the classroom and spreading his crumbs all over. And he was eating while talking, so I could see

everything. Ew.

"Okay. My father is my new professor. I had to dance tango. I met Japan's brother who saw me yell at her in my class, consequently, your father teaches my Nautical Engineering and Theory, and now you."

"Wow. A list." He chewed. "But yeah, sounds bad. Especially with my dad."

"Didn't you hear me?" I looked at him. I must've looked like a madman. "My father is now teaching here. My father. Soviet Union. USSR. Whatever you call him."

"Oh, Commie friend?" He licked his fingers. "Okay. So what? I'm not in his class though." It seemed like my comment sailed over him like the wind.

"I am." I whined.

He put his greasy hand on his chest. "To the bottom of my heart, I feel terribly sorry for you. Having a parent for a teacher is not an easy task."

"Ugh," I put my head the table.

America finished behaving like a pig and threw his bag away. "Sorry. I understand, though. It's pretty awkward. My dad doesn't acknowledge me in any special way, just treats me worse than the other students. Almost like he's degrading me on purpose because I have privileges. Spoiler, I don't." He licked his lips for the last time. "But isn't your dad like a physicist or something? He's not a teacher."

"I don't know the whole story." I sighed, propping my chin up with my knuckle. "He won't tell me."

"Hm, maybe my dad arranged something." He shrugged. "He always has a back door."

"Probably," I wasn't even in the mood to talk to him any more and just looked the other way, resting my head on the hard surface.

Unfortunately, America didn't believe in leaving conversations on a negative note. He liked to end with a goodbye. To do so, he stood up, walked around to the other side, and knelt down in front of me after setting his iced coffee in front of my face, centimetres before my eyes. The cold radiated from the drink and it irritated my skin. Groaning, I turned away from him again. He repeated his whole routine.

"Come on, Rus." He prodded my head. "What's the matter? So what if your dad's on campus?"

"Everything is up." I lifted my eyes a bit. "Especially since now I have some secrets to keep."

"Just don't tell him." He sipped his coffee loudly.

"Easy for you to say," I growled.

"Don't sweat it Rus," he patted me on the back rather roughly for such a doughy person. "I won't let it happen. Alright?"

"Yeah, sure." I sat upright, pulling my ushanka down below my eyes. "However you plan that to work."

"I always have a plan. I'm the Land of Endless Opportunities and Possibilities." He sat down at his desk, finally leaving me to breathe freely without the smell of fast food. "And don't you have Germany to talk to? I'm sure that he'll help you." I was so glad that the professor came in and America became quiet. As quiet as he can get. He just started to talk up to our professor, Sweden, who probably wasn't interested in America's chatter anyway. He looked calm, and even a bit bored when he came in and set his stack of folders on the table.

"Well, good afternoon everyone," Sweden smiled, fastening his yellow tie that matched his cross on his face. His placid demeanour, tan blazer with elbow patches, and slow movements reminded me so much of Iceland, his youngest brother. "My name is Professor Sweden, but I ask you to all call me Sweden. You can contact me at anytime after classes and I'm available. It's my bane." He gave us all a wide and sincere smile and wrote his phone number on the board.

"Anyone can call me. Except America. You are banned from calling me."

"Aw, why?" He said, even though he obviously was trying to suppress a smile.

"I don't need any more calls at two in the morning," Sweden sighed. "I remember last semester." He went on to talk about the class, how he would structure it, and what was the big takeaway. I realised this was going to be an easy grade. Since I didn't know how else to fill up my credits, I took this introduction to Coding. Japan would have loved it. Sweden was very methodical in his teaching pedagogy, and went as slow as he needed to get his point across. Beside me, America was yawning intermittently, and the other girl on my other side who came at the last minute was feverishly scribbling down notes in her tattered notebook. As if she would read them ever again. I couldn't call the class interesting, but I wasn't dying of boredom like America. It was one of those 'no comment' types.

"Bye Sweden!" America waved as he dragged me out of the class. I was taking too long for him, you see.

"Bye guys," he called from the class.

"Plans?" America turned to me.

"Yes," I lied straight through my teeth automatically. I didn't need to spend more time with him. The smell of chips was making me twitch. And it wasn't a complete lie. Germany asked me to go to the park with him in about five hours. And I had drama practice in two hours. So maybe I wasn't lying after all.

"Okay. See you at dinner then," he put in his earphones and left. I myself went back to my room. To ponder what was going on and wrap my head around my situation. One nasty surprise after another today. I hoped that no more of them would surface. I don't think I could take any more.

Warum bist du so schwierig -- Why are you so difficult

Weil ich ein schwieriges Leben habe -- Because I have a difficult life

Well, this chapter became *way* longer than expected, so I had to cut it. I hope my German here is okay.

Falling

[image]

I didn't want Russia to see how unnerved I actually was about this whole situation. I didn't want to worry him. At first, I couldn't hide my shock. Gradually through our conversation, I tried to act as if it was all trivial, and it didn't bother me. After I asked him to come walk with me this evening, and he agreed. Surprisingly. It was around fifteen thirty when I had proof that Russia was correct. There he was, in full colours, walking down the walkway with Mr. UK. Even though he was wearing newer and cleaner clothing, his full height, almost army style march, and glacial stare was out of sorts in the high intellectual circle. He certainly looked out of place next to Mr. UK. I tried to look for an alternate route, but had to face the fact that no alternative would look too suspicious, because all of them led straight into the grass and trees. Hooray for you, Germany. More awkwardness.

"Ah, good afternoon, Germany," Mr. UK obviously wasn't aware of my discomfort. USSR smiled in my direction, but then quickly looked away, his fleeting smile leaving as soon as his eyes did.

I decided to speak, since it would look rude to not answer. "Hello."

Mr. UK didn't get the gist that I wanted to leave. "I have wonderful news to give to you. Mr. Soviet Union is going to now be part of my teaching staff. Isn't that news, eh?"

He probably hoped for more surprise. "Oh, great. But I've heard from Russia already."

"Yes, unfortunately my previous employee had to leave urgently, so my post needed to be filled quickly. Thank goodness for the turn of events!"

"Yes," USSR nodded, though not particularly into the conversation. He was looking around and avoiding my gaze. He looked a bit lost.

Mr. UK grabbed USSR's arm and started to leave. "Well, we must go now. Good talking to you." Without waiting for my good bye, they left. I was so much n a hurry that I skipped up the steps and into my dorm room, slamming the door shut. Finland, who was already there with Estonia and reading a book, looked at me quizzically.

"What happened?" Finland questioned. "Someone chasing you?"

"Are you okay?" Estonia asked, his eyes rounding.

"I'm sure he's alright," Finland went back to his book. "It was only just an inference of mine."

"No, I'm fine." I gasped out. "Just...kind of in an awkward situation."

"Oh, you heard the news?" Estonia flipped back to the page he was on. "I almost dropped down three flights of stairs. Papa is now a professor. Soviet Union, great physicist and military leader, now a teacher at a university. I didn't believe it at first."

Finland smiled."I believed. I'll believe anything after professor Greece came to class two years ago wearing only a-,"

"Anyway," Estonia cut Finland off loudly. "But now I do. Because I saw him outside. Right before I barricaded myself in my dorm. My roommate thought I was on drugs or something."

"Hah! As if," Finland barked out. "What was with you, Germany? Was that it? Or did Estonia cut you off with his news flash?"

"No. I did run into him. But Russia is in his class, and didn't even get a notice."

"Oooh," Estonia grimaced. "That must've been quite the shock." He clutched his book tightly. "You think he's okay?"

"Russia? I'm sure he's fine." Finland shrugged. "Right?"

"Um, yeah. I think." I said. "Last time I checked."

"Hmm," Estonia looked unsure. "Are you sure, Finland?"

Finland pet his head affectionately. "Yes. I am. Just don't get yourself winded because of something that small. I know you like to do that."

"Well, I'll call anyway. Just to make sure."

"Oh, Estonia," Finland sighed, but let him dial. Estonia talked a little bit with Russia without intervention, and I went outside on the balcony to do some homework. I started another class of chemistry and the professor would assign much more work than before. I was all set to start with my history work when my phone started to vibrate and almost fell off the balcony.

"Hello?"

"Hi Germany," Came Russia's voice. It sounded a little choked. "Um, I don't think I can make it this evening." His breathing was coming out in short little gasps. I didn't question it.

"Oh, it's fine. I understand."

"Or...any time, actually. Seriously."

"Wait, what?" I clutched the phone in both hands. "What did you say?"

A quiet hiccup came from the other side."It means, I can't see you anymore. It's...I'm sorry...its over. Bye." He hung up before I could respond. I immediately dialled him once more, but he would pick up. I tried to text him, but he would respond either. I let the phone slip through my fingers and crash on the floor. Maybe it was a passing thing. He didn't mean it. Not surely. I went back inside to wash my face and wake myself up from this nightmare.

"Hey, what happened to you?" Finland looked up at me. "Seen a ghost?" Estonia was already gone by now, and he was comfortably lying on his bed, still reading.

"Uh, yeah." I passed him without another word. I splashed some water on my face, and looked in the mirror. My eyes looked disbelieving, and the pupils were so small I couldn't even make them out. I couldn't even think the whole situation through. Wasn't

I talking to him just hours ago? What happened? He couldn't just stop loving me...something happened. I had a feeling something involving his father. I didn't have the courage to go up to Pine College and see what was going on for myself. I wasn't that brave. Finland sensed that something was wrong, because he came in and peeled me off of the sink counter.

"Hey, what's wrong?" His icy gaze searched me.

I wasn't good at lying so I fessed up. "Russia happened."

"I knew something was going on between you two." He stood up and sighed. "What, he broke up with you or something?"

"Something." I repeated lamely. "But it felt like he didn't want to."

"USSR manipulating his children again." Finland raised his eyebrows. "His own anxiety had to be passed down. Everyone feels the aftershocks."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, I know so." Finland nodded gravely. "He's like that. It's subtle, but you feel it. The marionette strings of deceit and lies. I'm sure he has his grip tight around Russia."

"Is he that malevolent?" I sort of doubted Finland's view. But of course, I've never seen him do anything before.

"That and more." He said. "Don't forget who 'nicely talked' with him." On that note, he went out on the balcony, picked up my work, set it next to me, and sat outside, looking out on the campus. I felt empty, as if instead of insides, I was filled with air. It was not a good feeling. I didn't want to cry, or scream, or even think. I really wanted to go and find out what exactly happened, but every time I had that though, one million more negative versions of the future outcomes crowded around it. All I could do was lie there and do nothing. I was glad that I did everything beforehand. Because I would've never been able to do it after. I spent the night just staring upwards into my ceiling. I didn't think I would be so devastated, that's how much he meant to me.

I didn't sleep very well last night, and I looked kind of pale. To mask the fact that I looked zombie-like, I hung my head off my bed for some time. It seemed to do the trick, and I went down to the dining hall to be met by America and South Korea. They were wearing matching black jackets with a sports team logo. I sat down next to them and ate silently. Even though it was only a couple of hours, it felt like I haven't or won't see Russia forever. To my logical mind it was silly, to my subconscious it was disastrous. It was good that my trick worked, because the didn't say anything out of the sorts.

"Hey," South waved in my direction. "Had a good night."

"Eeh, not great. It was fine." I was overinflating the lie, but what could I do? I would never tell them the truth. Unless America did his uncanny trick of figuring out exactly what happened.

"That's good," America was snarfing down waffles with bacon. The sickeningly sweet smell drifted over everything. I didn't even want to eat anymore. I absently sipped at the orange juice I brought, staring into no particular point. Unfortunately, it was right at another student that had almost the same tricolour as Russia, and he glared back at me. He had thick eyebrows, shortly and stocky body, and a cutthroat stare. Never mind, he didn't look like Russia at all. As he left, he made an obscene gesture at me. "Hey! Bulgaria! Don't do that!" America must have noticed.

"It wasn't for you," the man who I assumed was Bulgaria growled back in a very thick accent.

"Boy, an attitude," South huffed.

"Eh, people are like that," America shrugged. "But the hand was unnecessary." He continued to eat his waffles, and then moved on to his bacon. South sipped on his coffee that he sprinkled pepper in.

"Oh, time," he glanced at his phone. "Nice seeing you, Germany. Oh, almost forgot, Italy said 'hi'."

"Thank you, well him I said hi as well." America was wolfing down the rest of his breakfast, and couldn't physically say goodbye, but he

waved cheerfully to me. Grabbing some green tea, I left for my first class of the day. It would go by pretty quickly, and before I knew it, I descended down into my philosophy class. I wasn't expecting much from today. Professor Andorra was dreamier than ever. I sat down in my usual spot and prepared for a class of ramblings and monologues. Precisely at the start of the class, Andorra drifted in like a cloud and wrote our objectives on the board. I copied them out on the board without much thought. And then I reread them.

"Good morning," Andorra said quietly, her rich voice echoing along the bare walls. The lamp bulb flickered a little. "Today, we will go over one notion that is very important." She spoke so slowly, that between my melancholy and her voice, I was starting nod off. I didn't want to, but I was by far the most awake in the class. All of the other students were either pretending to be awake, or plainly sleeping in sight. "Today, we are going to discuss What is Love? What does it mean, how do we define it and how do we keep this invisible yet so very strong bond." I immediately perked up. The atmosphere changed very much when she said that. It was finally becoming interesting. She went over the points on the old blackboard slowly, and then turned back to us. "Now, the first thing we should know. What does trust mean? How can we define the word?"

"Uh, when you can...rely on somebody?" Croatia offered. "With secrets, and things like that."

"Yes, were getting close," Andorra smiled and wrote Croatia's response down.

"When you'll go with somebody till the end." Another person yelled out. She wrote that on the board.

"When you're happy to be with another person?"

"Being alongside somebody even when things get tough." She kept writing everyone's answers down.

"Magic. Just magic."

"Your answers are all good," she nodded. "Now, we'll all make a

definition based on your answers. Trust, when you can safely rely on someone, and joy, when you feel happy by their side, is the notion we call love." She wrote down the definition on the board. "So going forward..." That's what it was? So simple? Joy and trust? Maybe all emotions were just simple notions layered on top of one another. Could you just subdivide everything into simple components? Somehow, in an unexplainable way, I just clicked. Sitting in the dank room with no windows, several metres below the ground with a bare bulb shining overhead, I think I've just changed. It was as if I shook off the last tiny tendrils of innocent childhood leave me. And even though there were no stirrings in the still air, I felt fresh and crisp like after a cold rain. I silently thanked Professor Andorra. Without her, I probably would still be in my cage of misery, thoughts circling like crows over a carcass. When I left the class an hour later, I thanked her verbally. She returned a dreamy smile and herded another gaggle of students in. I should find Russia, reach back out. Maybe now, with this unexplained confidence, I could tackle the world. Well, at least for today, anyway. The question is, how to get him to understand?

Small People, Big World

[image]

I didn't know why I dialled Germany's mobile and told him all of that. Moment of weakness, I guess. I felt really horrible, before, during and after I said that I didn't want to see him anymore. With the stress of seeing my father, him being my professor, him watching me here...it was all too much. I didn't think I could do it all. There were too many secrets, too many unknowns. I thought I could handle it when he was thousands of kilometres away, but with him here, practically breathing down my neck, I didn't think that it would take long for fiery scandals to erupt. I'm sure my father didn't regard Germany as important for me, nor did it help that I read banned books right under his nose. Iceland knew what was going on, but he didn't intervene, support, or question my decision. He just looked on with his scarlet eyes, wanting to say something but holding it in. He wouldn't understand.

How does it always happen that all of your future hangs by one tiny, incremental moment? It's been like that since the ninth grade, and I've lived like that ever since. Constant, high pressurized stress that if I don't do this right, everything else will go up in flames. I would put on the brave face for the world, appear solemn, and receive my awards with a small smile when others would scream for joy. Little do people know that I am expected to do this. I am expected to be the top. I am expected to have everything in order. With all of those expectations, I create my own roadblocks, my own worries, punishments, high expectations, low gratification. And then people still think I'm a brawny idiot. Many people are still smarter than me, in other fields. In history, literature, the arts,

biology. I was one small person in the wide world. I created my own worry, now without my father's intervention. And I suffer my own small consequences. That's what I go to Dr. Austria for. That was my emotional problem.

It was a cheery April morning. It was evident that soon enough it would be May, because many flowers started to bloom fully. All I could do was stare at them, not frowning, but not smiling either. Trapped between total depression and normality.

"Um..." Iceland would always start his sentences like that now. Like he's afraid I might round on him one of these days like a supercell tornado. "...do you want to come down with me, Russia? Or...should I bring something for you, like usual?" He mashed his fingers together, uncertain of what to do. I tried to not show my face around much, since I was worried that Germany might be there. So I sat in the room as much as possible, like a soldier in a trench. The arrangement of him bringing me things started not too long ago, but both of us soon became accustomed to it. Iceland was now used to being an awkward onlooker. It was all part of the Avoidance Plan. I tried to stay away from Germany as much as possible, but it was hard when you sat next to him in a class. He would try to talk, and I would suddenly pretend that I forgot English. And then he would speak German. A few colourful interactions there. And of course, a wildfire of gossip.

"I guess....I'll come with you today." My voice sounded scratchy. From underuse, I supposed. Not only did I stop being social in public, I didn't speak much. Only when I absolutely needed to. Iceland blinked twice, but didn't voice his amazement. The warm air was very nice on my skin, and it finally seemed like winter went into a hibernation of its own. It felt warmer than in the early morning, the time when I ran (to not see anyone, of course,) and you could notice the changes in people's clothing, going from thick fur jackets to waterproof ponchos, and now to short cut windbreakers and long sleeves. We went inside the building, which looked much darker on the inside than usual because they turned off the lights. In a matter of minutes after we sat down and started to eat, I felt someone sit right next to me. I drink want to turn, and I kept on eating.

"Hey," the voice came, which sounded like ice cracking.

"Oh, hi Finland!" Iceland turned to his older brother. "We didn't see you, sorry."

"Mmm, it's fine." He looked down at me with his strange light blue gaze, and I was forced to glare back. I knew he sat down here for a reason. Only a matter of time till he told me. I turned away and started to eat the slices of Orange on my plate when he decided to speak. "I wanted to ask, is it your specialty to leave people without explanations?" His tone wasn't threatening, but he sounded confrontational. I had to snap out of my trance and actually think. What was he talking about? Leave people....oh, yes! He was Germany's flatmate. As soon as that thought entered my head, my heart sunk.

"Well...I-,"

"I didn't ask for explanation." He said. "At least not for myself. I hope you're prepared to give a speech for Germany, though. You left him without a word." He flicked his fork and then looked at around. "I don't blame you personally. I think it's something else."

I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. Really. "Um...."

"Just, talk to Germany and tel him what's going on." He seemed to understand that his words were lost in me. "Because he is, was, and will be sad till you reach back out to him. It all depends upon you, mister." He pointed at me. "Nähdään pian, Islantia." He left with a coffee cup in his hand.

"Bæ bæ." Iceland gave his brother a quick smile. He didn't have time to say anything else, because it was already time to leave. I had to endure yet another class with my father. Each time it got weirder and weirder. I assumed that all my classmates knew that me and the professor were related. Some started to put two and two together understood the story. I was glad that none of them voiced their hunches. Well, maybe Denmark did. Once. I had to admit that father wasn't as bad at this as I thought. His plans and classes were going smoothly, and nobody complained that lessons were boring or too intensive. However did he get so good at this I will never get

to know. Not only did he change his clothing, but he changed his attitude as well. The only thing I recognized were his green eyes. I wondered if that would change as well.

Today, father was wearing a crisp white cotton polo shirt, khaki pants with rolled up ends that showed his rather old black boots. The silver wristwatch shone on his bare arm. At least he was still wearing his brown ushanka. If he were to not, I don't think I could've stranded his presence it would be so foreign. "Hi mister!" Denmark waved to him as she entered. It was now known that she was his favourite student. I had the feeling that America was right when he talked about his father. I didn't even have the slightest chance to be favourite. Father, (I just can't call him 'Professor', that would be too much) waved back to Denmark cheerfully. He was writing something on a slip of paper and then stood up to write the date on the board. I noticed that he liked to do that.

"Good morning," he said to her. I sat down in the spot I usually sat, in the front row, as far away from father's desk as possible. I still was noticed, though. Father expected me to know everything that he threw at me, and sometimes it was a struggle to even remember the facts I knew. Father would start the lesson not a minute earlier, not a minute late. It was your problem if you came late, you would have to catch up on your own. He could try to be a new person, but his stringent expectations, by the book teaching, and strict methods stuck like glue. Unlike all other teaching staff, he preferred to me called 'mister' or 'professor' rather than when students used his name. I would just say 'um' if I had a question. It worked. "So, good morning again, and our lesson for today is to deal with statistics. Everyone know statistics, right?" Father didn't exactly flaunt his English skills. He never had to use this much English before, and his sentences became grammatically incorrect. Our class politely disregarded it, thankfully. "What is very important for engineers, in the maths, is to calculate risk. Usually, the formula goes as follows, Risk equals to threat times vulnerabilities times probability times impact all divided by countermeasures. Calculated risk helps you identify wether or not you should continue to run an experiment, manufacture, etcetera." He wrote is equation on the board. "I would write this using variables, but this is fine."

"So how do we find all the things like threat and probability and stuff?" Someone asked.

"Okay," he divided the board into two pieces. "This is where we need to know some statistics. Hopefully we know Standard Deviation. Taking a series, we can continue to..." He launched into his long talk. Needless to say, I already knew how to calculate risk. It was his job before he came to Mr. UK and I would listen to the small details of it all. I knew father enjoyed it, firstly because of the rapt attention, and secondly because he was an expert in the field. Lucky for me, today was a theory class, and he didn't fire questions at anyone. That would be next time.

The rest of the day was kind of the same. I actually forgot my worries because I almost felt normal but he time the academic day ended. Carefree, and light. It wasn't till I was heading back from theatre practice when I saw him. And he definitely saw me. Abandoning all reason, I dashed as fast as usual could the other direction of Germany.

"Russia! Wait!" He yelled, but I already was pelting down the lane. I could sense him following me, slower, harder, but never stopping. I stopped and faced him. I saw triumph flash in his gaze and then wild surprise when I hared in his direction, doubling back. I had to get away. Blindly, I ran towards whatever my frenzied brain wanted. I streaked past the library, the gates, the flashing city, the closing doors, the barbed wire, the huge lorries, the people, the stares, the unkind thoughts and eyes. I felt like I could go on forever, just running and running. What a nice time to have Runner's high! That was, until I tripped over a rock and ended up somersaulting over a bench and landing with my face in a pond. "Russia!"

"Ugh," I wasn't going to run anymore. It was no use. I heard Germany's ragged breathing above me and knew there was no where to go but forward. My avoidance cost me misery, and now I was left to deal with the consequences. I sat up slowly, spitting out weeds and muck till I was ready to face him. Fishing my ushanka out from the muddy wallow that it was in, I placed it on my head.

At least it wasn't bad on the inside.

"Russia..." Germany started for me. It was wonderful to hear my name from his mouth. "What's wrong?" He was trying to be gentle, but I knew he was also angry underneath his sugary kindness. He wanted to know the truth and unfortunately for him, I didn't have the energy or desire to do just so. "Please tell me. You haven't talked to me for weeks now." His voice became almost commanding. "I would at least like an explanation. Why are you avoiding me?"

"Because of everything. Me." I gasped out. "I'm afraid, Germany."

"Of what? Your father?"

"Maybe," I looked away. "Maybe not."

I knew he was getting frustrated. "Maybe?"

"I'm just afraid of the future. Of what might happen next. Now with so many unknowns, I feel like every turn might bring disaster." I tried to compose my sentences so that they didn't sound too mashed together. I hoped he'd understand all of my garbling.

"Why are you afraid of what might happen?" He cocked his head to the side. Instead of answering, I looked down and sobbed quietly. He sighed and stood up on his toes to circle my neck with his arms. "Russia..."

"What?" I moaned out, so tired of everyone sidestepping issues.

"How funny you are," He whispered. That was unexpected. I didn't really understand his words. I let him continue after his short laugh. "Haven't life experiences told you anything? How the world works, how we all live?" He rested his head on my chest. "You don't realise how horribly devastated I felt when you said those words? It was like all of my problems formed a huge avalanche and befell me. I didn't know how to go on. That's how I felt. We're small people in this big new world."

"Oh," I said quietly, pulling him in tighter for an embrace. He probably didn't notice, but I was becoming more and more calm the

longer we stood like this. His words started to make sense. And I started to feel more and more guilty for what I've done.

"Isn't life all about risk? You're born risking. Every step, breath, movement, word. It's all how you think it'll turn out. Have you ever thought of what would happen if you didn't apply to come here? Would we have ever met? I doubt it. Life is all about knowing the risks, weighing the consequences and taking that first step. We've gone through all of that. You have. I have. Now it's just a matter of do we want to continue. Do we want to continue this next chapter of such a difficult but so rewarding relationship. I really love you, Russia. Don't think that I'm just saying it out of pity or to undermine you. I hope that you love me back. Can we write the next chapter of this curious but so winsome story together?"

I was at loss for words. He looked up at me, his eyes reflecting the dying sun so beautifully, the rays penetrating so deep into his pleasant orange brown stare. His speech wasn't going to be met with words. I couldn't match his proise and fluid use of appellation. I would meet his address with actions.

Leaning down, I kissed him ever so slightly. I lightly brushed his lips and then went deeper. He practically melted into the kiss, and I lifted him off the ground, still in the tight lock. The electric waves went from my lips, pulsing through me down to my feet. My heart ached from love and I wished the moment would last forever. Never before had I kissed someone like that. We both broke the kiss, gasping for air, smiling widely. I set him down slowly, and he immediately tugged at my shirt to pull me in for another one. We ended up lying on the grass, him on top of me, purring contentedly. I stroked his back and vowed silently to never leave him again. Cupping his face in my hands, I whispered in his ear. "I think we can go on much more confidently now."

"You think?" He blinked playfully.

"I know." Maybe things would get better. I still had my small doubts that I didn't raise. My father, academics, forbidden knowledge, the past, the future. My laundry list went on and on. But I was a small person in the big world who just wanted to feel like there was a place for me. That I wasn't outcast or rejected. Under the playful

watch of the young moon and when the last beams of sunlight left our corner of the earth, I perceived the significance of trust. Yes, trust can be dangerous. Yes, it could hurt. But when people turn upon one another because they become headless beasts without reason, isn't it trust that keeps us sane, human, alive? The echo of my father's strained voice yelling out dissolved in my mind as I nuzzled my lover's neck. I knew, I found, I understood that whatever might it be, a wall, a battle, an inner conflict, I could always count on my love. He would be there. Always.

Nähdään pian, Islantia - see you soon, Iceland

Bæ bæ - Bye

The Last Act

[image]

I was a bit teary when Russia kissed me. I couldn't even describe my thoughts, my feeling of pure euphoria. We lay in the grass under the gaze of the watchful moon, just enjoying the moment. I didn't need words to portray my emotions to Russia. He already felt them. I couldn't perceive of the time, but before I knew it, Russia was gently prodding me awake. I was still lying on top of him, but this time I felt much more sleepy.

"Good morning," he smiled. It didn't look like morning yet. It was dark, except for a rare car that went by.

"How do you know?" I said back and rolled off him.

"Mmm, I know." He stood up, stretching his back. "We spent the night here. In the park." He dusted off his ushanka, which was now dry but still dirty from its trip out of the pond. "You know, like homeless people."

"I've never slept better in my life," I admitted. He cracked a grin and took my hand so that we walked out side by side, where once we chased each other for information.

"I wonder if Iceland is mad." He thought aloud. "I don't need a search party coming after me."

My giggle reassured him. "I don't think so. I mean, it was only for the night." We walked back to the quiet and unmoving campus. Nobody stirred in the standstill atmosphere, and it was when the last tendrils of night were upon us. I slid under Russia's protective arm as we walked among the small manicured lawns and statues and trees. Soon all of the university would be alive and crawling with bright eyed students all chattering and moving along with their thoughts, hopes, dreams, and wishes. The warm wind tickled my cheek, asking me to come and play. Soon the sun would warm our side of the world and we would abandon the teeming city for

the quiet country once more. May signified the end of the year, the end of the old, start of the new.

"Do you know what day today is?" Russia whispered to me.

"Yes," I breathed back, not wanting to stir the fragile stillness. "Ninth of May."

"Mhmm," he nodded, clutching me even closer.

"Change is inevitable." I said. "You can't change the fact that yes, my father died today those years ago. I don't want to be sad. No, I want to be happy that old streams cut new ways and waining candles burn no more." I blinked up at him, smiling. "Aren't we the future who honour the past?"

"You amaze me, Philosopher." He laughed.

"That better not be my nickname," I teased.

"Why not?"

"It's too long." I say. "Nicknames are supposed to be short."

"Don't count on me calling you 'bunny' or 'sweetheart'." He smirked. "I'm not one of those people."

"I never thought you were." We arrived at Oak College. This is where we parted ways for the day. "You're always surprising me in different ways. But I know you're never going to let down your 'tough' image."

"As if I had one." He huffed. "I sure didn't try."

"Well, think again. A lot of people think you are." I opened the gate and was about to go through the small tunnel, when he stopped me.

"Oh, Germany, I forgot." He dug around in his shirt pocket. "I am lucky this didn't get wet."

"Yes?"

He took out a slip of paper. A cardstock. "Um, I kind of wanted to give this to you earlier...but...I didn't have the chance." He fumbled with it. "It's a ticket to my play. I got a ticket for you. Will you come?"

"Of course!" He slipped the cardstock through the iron bars of the gate. "It better be nicer than my gallery idea."

"Oh, it will." He promised. "I didn't sweat over all of this for nothing." He waved goodbye and lightly jogged out of view. Nineteen o'clock at the Peace Theatre. Queen of Spades, staged by the IUUP. Tomorrow. And Russia wasn't worried about that at all? I would be. Yawning slightly, knowing that I wouldn't be sleeping for much time, I crept up the stone steps and into my dorm room. I was prepared for a good morning from Finland. He never questioned my motives. He was good at giving people space.

Our professors were rushing with their material in time to cram it all in for the final exams. I couldn't understand a word coming from Professor Spain's mouth he was talking so fast. His Spanish was coming out half in English and half in Spanish swears. That was before he grounded a whole chalk into the board from frustration.

Andorra was probably one of the most placid. Her calmness radiated out of her, and students appreciated her laid back attitude in the middle of the super storm surge around us. Nine and a half times out of ten Mr. UK was holding a teacup with strong smelling tea in it. The half was when America knocked his cup out of his hands and spilled fountain pen ink onto his father's vest. That wasn't very pretty to watch.

My grandfather came to walk with me in the afternoon and we talked for a bit out of sight. He apologised for his carelessness and seemingly light attitude towards my father's death. He told me that he would take care of me if I ever needed him. He made aware that I had family and that I didn't have to feel alone. I was touched by his apology. In turn I confessed everything about my relationship with Russia, but all he did was smile and nod.

"I knew," he said so simply. "It wasn't hard to spot. Especially from a distance."

"Opa...." I started.

"I definitely wasn't spying, no." He laughed.

"And how much did you even see?" I questioned whether or not I wanted to ask.

"Enough." He replied cryptically. I would press for further information. I didn't want to know.

It was sort of a time for goodbyes as well. Finland was going off to graduate school, and high fived his friend Serbia for making it in after the horrible year and making it to the next level. I told him that I would miss his company. He was so understanding and he never poked his nose into my business. I appreciated his long tangents about theoretical mathematics and sometimes weird humour involving fish. It was nice to know that he was there, maybe not my friend, but we still had a bond. Who else would make cheese and lettuce salad with so much ketchup? I will definitely miss the crumpled papers with the Riemann sums, conjectures, and multiple derivatives, the smell of coffee that wafted into the room, the black e-cigarette that laid on the counter, the soft sound of marker on whiteboard, and the vast amount of Finnish swears I learned over the year. The icy hand, small blue eyes, sharp humour, and barking laugh. No, I really do respect his role in my life.

Luxembourg made us all swear that we'd come see him next year or take one of his classes. He asked me what I was thinking of doing as a major and my response made him laugh and cry at the same time. After all those months of being undecided, I put my foot down and said I'd like to continue history, much to the surprise of professor Hungary and dismay of everyone else. Matter of fact was that I liked to search deep into archives to read and decipher what exactly happened in the world when we weren't there. Maybe it was because of my father, and I want to know about what happened. Maybe it is because I am searching for the truth. Maybe it is because I needed to figure myself out. Maybe it is because I was

stuck in the past. I don't know. But what I do know is that I will follow the path I choose and nobody, not even my foster father can change it.

Speaking of whom, USSR was fitting into the university staff well. He finally gave up of governance after a long and hard period of time, and left it to his fifteen children. Even though he wasn't my personal professor, Russia told me that he was getting better at his job. Both with English and teaching. Maybe that was his real calling. He found a relatively nice looking flat (perfect in his standards) and it was enough for Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to live in for the school year along with their pet silkie chickens, while they would keep their old and drafty mansion for the summer. It seemed that they also were starting to get used to their new life. Everything was going well.

It was almost time for the play to start. The lights were dimmed and the whole theatre was teeming with people. Opening night was full of people, and I spotted USSR out in the distance sitting with Kazakhstan in his lap. It was too far away to see, but I assumed that Belarus and Ukraine were with him. Soon the light shut off and the quiet music started. It started with the first scene. The casino and I saw two students and Russia in old style army uniforms. They were playing cards. I wasn't a professional but I think he played out his role perfectly. When the last scene ended, the curtains closed and the lights powered back on to reveal Professor France, who directed the whole production. Then came the lesser actors, and then the major actors. Lastly came the countess, played by Israel, and Hermann, Russia. He was smiling widely, and I didn't even see his nervous twitch. I stood up and clapped. Someone threw flowers. Many more followed. Even though Russia didn't consider himself a good actor, he could play his role very nicely. Just like he did in real life.

Now I was standing outside with Russia who was still in his costume. It was after the curtains closed and his father had already gave him flowers. A bouquet of buttery yellow carnations and pink tulips was in his hand, and in the other mine. I don't know who gave it to him, but I had the fleeting idea.

"You know," I smiled up at him. He was not wearing his ushanka at the moment. "You really really look like your grandfather."

"No!" He laughed.

"I'm serious," I couldn't hold my own churring back. "Especially now, with the uniform. And it doesn't help that you have his eye colour."

"Oh no," he moaned with a smile on his face. "As soon as I thought I might not inherit anything else."

"Sorry to tell you that," I stroked his arm lightly.

"I know that I might be a bit like my grandfather," he conceded. "But new age needs new people and new ideas, right?"

"Something along those lines." I nodded. He leaned down and kissed me deeply.

"Something." He repeated. "I'll leave philosophy for you, hmm?"

"Sure. I'll stay away from the mundane of engineering," I agreed.

"Do you think it was all worth it?" He asked me. "The change?"

"It certainly has been different, difficult, and very, very surprising. I didn't expect to meet you, nor to change my view. I think my past self would laugh at me now." I confessed.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess I never expected to have things turn out this way either," he looked out on the campus of the IUUP. We certainly did make a long way here. I didn't expect much to happen the last days here. Maybe the rush would engulf me in so much that I wouldn't be able to think anymore. One thing I knew for certain was that I grounded myself here. It was my home away from home. Maybe my first true place of belonging. Being by Russia's side was where I felt best. Nobody would ever tell otherwise. No figures in streams, no

nightmares in the early morning, and no fears from the past whole ever separate us. I asked Russia for one last kiss before we came back to the reality of it all.

"You're never going to abait, huh?" He smiled.

"Never." I laughed as we turned away from the sweeping views of the campus. Everything was going to be just fine. I was sure of it. However sure I can get.

Acknowledgments and Bows

[image]

Thank you for reaching the end of this book. It was a long journey of writing, drafting, and editing, but it was all worth it. This is my first ever Wattpad book, and my first book that I have ever published!

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Danke schön